

The Paradoxical Impacts of the Commemorations of the Great War in Belgium

1. Introduction

In Western Europe¹, the centenary of WWI is marked by what observers called “a commemorative fever”.² Since 2014, from Portugal to France, hundreds of commemorative activities have attracted thousands of citizens.³ Belgium is at the epicentre of this dynamic. In this country – that was occupied during the four years of war and endured huge destructions and massacres – the commemorations of the centenary are qualified as the largest commemorative event ever organized.⁴ They are anchored at the local, the regional and the national levels and take different forms such as ceremonies, exhibitions, lectures, book presentations, TV shows and series. An important amount of resources (e.g., public and private funding; time spent by academic experts) has been invested in these initiatives. However, to date, little is known about the potential effects of the commemorations on the individuals who participated in them. Do commemorations influence psychological variables? If so, to what extent, and how does it happen? To address these questions, the present chapter investigates the influence of commemorations from a social psychological perspective. More specifically, it focuses on the impact of two forms of commemorations – namely: exhibitions and documentaries – on a specific kind of psychological variable especially emphasized by the designers of WWI commemorations: pacifist attitudes.

Attitudes are a key concept in social psychology. They correspond to “evaluations individuals hold towards elements in their environment”.⁵ We will analyze pacifist attitudes, conceived in this case as a mix of negative attitudes towards war and positive attitudes towards peace.

The starting point of our approach lies in the belief, widely shared in the political and academic spheres, that commemorations are likely to change the knowledge and attitudes of the public.⁶ Commemorations are based on certain values and mobilize a set of representations. In terms of values, the notion of peace constitutes the central axis of most memorial activities in Belgium.⁷ Given this focus, we could expect that participation in commemorative activities will influence the level of pacifist attitudes of the participants. But what are the mechanisms that could explain the influence of the commemorations on attitudes?

2. Commemorations and Persuasion

In Belgium, the individualization/personalization of the relation to the past constitutes one of the fundamental aspects of some of the most successful commemorative activities and especially of documentaries and exhibitions. This individualization is made possible, among other things, by portraying everyday life during the war and the reference to characters with which individuals can more or less easily identify. This effect is typically palpable in museums and exhibitions.⁸ Interactive visits are organized around stories of the war experience of specific characters. This immersion in the narrative of an individual experience is reinforced by the use of a specific scenography and music, arousing visitors’ empathy and emotions.⁹ According to Wouters, “this approach of identification is mostly a continuation and reinforcement of the most essential, traditional core-narrative of WWI commemorations, namely the pacifist one”.¹⁰ This focus on pacifism constitutes the core of

¹ A shorter version of this article has been published in *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps* (2016). See references.

² See e.g., Fillière 2016; Verreycken 2015.

³ See e.g., Wellings 2016; Winter 2014.

⁴ Wouters 2016.

⁵ Aronson, Wilson & Akert 2005, cited by Sammut 2015, 97.

⁶ See Lavabre 2001.

⁷ See Bost & Kesteloot 2014; Wouters 2016.

⁸ Bedford 2001.

⁹ This is especially the case in the two exhibitions we studied: *J’avais 20 ans en 14* and *14 – 18: c’est notre histoire* (for a description, see below).

¹⁰ Wouters 2016, 83.

the commemorations in Flanders and is an important value of the commemorations in the other Belgian communities. Given these specificities, we will address the question of the effects of the commemorations by considering a mechanism where emotions and identification hold a key role.

“All forms of human communication need to be seen fundamentally as stories”.¹¹ This strong assertion underlies what was then a new concept in communication theory, the narrative paradigm. This approach to human communication has influenced a wealth of literature far beyond its original realm. In psychology and communication research, Fisher’s insights have been imported into the field of narrative persuasion. Narrative persuasion occurs when “stories” or narratives, influence individuals’ beliefs, attitudes, behaviors.¹² This research particularly focuses on attitudes. That stories can be used to convey messages or foster attitudes is familiar to anyone who has been exposed to a parabola from the Bible such as *the Good Samaritan*, a fable by Jean de La Fontaine, such as *the Hare and the Tortoise*, or watched a film by Charlie Chaplin, such as *Modern Times* (to borrow examples from Western culture only). Basically, information presented in the form of narratives has much more chance of impacting the audience than information presented in another way (see next paragraph). The contribution of narrative persuasion research has resided in the empirical observation of this phenomenon through methods inspired by experimental psychology.¹³ So far, narrative persuasion has been studied via written extracts, books, short video clips and full-length movies. Moreover, the impact of the narratives on attitudes has been mainly studied in relatively controlled environments.¹⁴ However, if one returns to Fisher’s original formulation of the narrative paradigm, storytelling is not limited to such messages and environments. Humans are continually exposed to communications (e.g., radio spots, artistic representations, exhibitions). These narratives form the bulk of everyday communication and exert a great variety of effects on people’s attitudes. We could then expect narrative persuasion to occur also through specific forms of commemorative activities. But how does narrative persuasion work?

Basically, narration immerses the receiver in the narrative, reduces her capacity to process information in depth, leading to potential attitude change. Identification with a character plays a key role in the effects of a narrative on attitudes.¹⁵ Most stories involve characters audiences can identify with. Identification is a process in which individuals’ self-awareness decreases and is replaced by a heightened emotional and cognitive connection with a character in the story.¹⁶ Through this process, individuals come to feel what the character feels (emotional empathy), endorse the character’s perspective (cognitive empathy) and even have the sensation of being the character (merging).¹⁷ As an immersive process, identification reduces the ability to counter-argue, leading the individual to more easily adopt beliefs and attitudes related to those contained in the message.¹⁸ For instance, if the message of a story is related to peace, we could then expect that identification with a character of this story will lead to an adoption of pacifist attitudes.

While evidence supports the link between identification with characters and attitudes, the question of its underlying mechanisms is still open. In a recent study, Hoeken and Sinkeldam put forward the role of emotions in the narrative persuasion process.¹⁹ Emotions have traditionally been considered as an effect of exposure to narratives²⁰, but their impact on attitudes has also been acknowledged.²¹ According to a recent model,²² specific (sadness-related) emotions are believed to mediate the relation between identification with characters and attitudes while other emotions do not. Building on Frijda’s work,²³ Hoeken and Sinkeldam consider emotions as signals to the individual that his or her interests are at stake. In this sense, negative emotions would alert individuals that are identified with characters that what is happening in the narration is not in their interest. This would in turn, influence individuals’ attitudes.

¹¹Fisher 1987, xi.

¹² See e.g., Green, Strange & Brock 2003.

¹³ See e.g., Cho, Shen & Wilson 2014; Dal Cin, Zanna & Fong 2002; Diekmann, Gardner & McDonald 2000; Hoeken & Sinkeldam 2014; Igartua 2010; Morgan, Movius & Cody 2009; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi 2010; Slater, Rouner & Long 2006.

¹⁴ See e.g., Hoeken & Sinkeldam 2014; Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, Jones 2010.

¹⁵ See e.g., De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders & Beentjes 2011; Slater & Rouner 2002.

¹⁶ Cohen 2001.

¹⁷ Cohen 2001; Green & Dill 2013; Hoeken & Fiekkers 2014.

¹⁸ Igartua 2010; Igartua & Barrios 2012; Slater & Rouner 2002.

¹⁹ Hoeken & Sinkeldam 2014.

²⁰ See e.g., Oatley 2002.

²¹ See e.g., Dillard & Anderson 2004; Earl & Albarracín 2007.

²² See Hoeken & Sinkeldam 2014.

²³ Frijda 1986.

Could this mechanism of narrative persuasion account for the potential change of attitudes following participation in a commemoration? This is what we will see as the result of five studies conducted at two kinds of commemorative activities: exhibitions and documentaries. In its modern sense, commemoration is a more or less ritualized and more or less official cultural practice, which consists in the recall in the present of a past event. It is a manifestation of memory that can take the form of monuments,²⁴ images²⁵ and more often celebrations.²⁶ What is usually commemorated are events perceived as important by a society or group of individuals (often victories and founding events). Commemoration is defined as a political act and fulfils a key function in the shaping of social identity. It is an opportunity to develop a common narrative of the past and the reaffirmation of shared values. In this regard, it allows the creation of a link between the members of the society and the affirmation of their collective identity.²⁷ But beyond this identity-shaping function, commemoration can also serve as a tribute. The latter is particularly important in the case of commemorations of wars and other conflicts. In this case, expressing some form of mourning for the victims of war would make sense of the sacrifices made during the conflict.²⁸

Over the last few decades, commemorations have taken an increasingly important place at the societal level. This phenomenon, noticeable since the 1980s, has been described as *frénésie/fièvre/course/obsession/boulimie commémorative*.²⁹ Their forms have also evolved. They now exceed traditional collective gatherings and ceremonies. Thus, according to Nora,

“l’esprit de la commémoration s’exprime dorénavant bien plus à travers la télévision, les musées, les théâtres, l’exposition « obligatoire » et le « fatidique colloque »” [The spirit of commemoration is now expressed more and more through television, museums, theatres, the "compulsory" exhibition and the "fateful colloquium"].³⁰

This process unfolds globally and its inflation seems supported by public media.³¹ Although these new forms of commemorations are characterized by the lesser role they give to social gatherings, they involve a fairly similar set of cognitive and emotional processes as prototypical commemorations.³² It is these new kinds of commemorations that we will investigate in the following studies. The first activity we will focus on is the visit of exhibitions.

3. Exhibitions

The goals of historical exhibitions are multiple. One of them is generally to draw lessons from history, where historical events are a vehicle for generating such lessons. And they rely more and more on narratives in order to transport the visitor in the historical events they portray.³³ As such, exhibitions and museums can be interpreted as conveyors of stories.³⁴ The biggest exhibitions organized in Belgium on the occasion of the centenary of WWI – *J’avais 20 ans en 14* [*I was 20 in 14*] and *14-18: c’est notre histoire!* [*14-18: It’s our History!*] – rely heavily on narratives. The first exhibition took place at the Liège-Guillemins railway station and was opened to the public between August 2014 and May 2015. It extended over 4,000 m² and presented some aspects of the day-to-day life in Belgium during WWI. It has been designed to put an emphasis on emotions and character identification:

“Walk through an ultra-realistic 30-meter long trench with striking sound and light effects”; “Enter a peaceful chapel that overlooks the poignant scene of an execution of civilians”.³⁵

²⁴ Prost 1984; Savage 2007.

²⁵ Schwartz 1982.

²⁶ Cottret & Henneon 2010.

²⁷ See Ashplant, Dawson & Roper 2000; Spillman 1997.

²⁸ Loyd 2014; Mosse 1991; Simpson 2006.

²⁹ See e.g. François 1994; Gillis 1996; Nora 1992.

³⁰ Nora 1992, 985.

³¹ Cottret & Henneon 2010.

³² See Bouchat & Rimé 2017.

³³ Lambert 2009.

³⁴ Bedford 2001; Rounds 2002.

³⁵ Press File 2014, 11.

Reconstitutions of trenches with noises of explosions, a destroyed house with cries of a young child, made the exhibition extremely realistic and emotional. Six months after its official opening, the exhibition had attracted more than 150,000 visitors.³⁶ It explicitly focused inter alia on pacifism, as its development is one of the major effects of WWI:

“The exhibition underlines the importance of the fundamental value of peace, a guarantee of democracy, freedom, justice and solidarity”.³⁷

The second exhibition, *14-18: c’est notre histoire!*, which constitutes the frame of the second and third studies, took place between February 2014 and November 2015 at the Royal Museum of the Army and of Military History in Brussels. It attracted over 175,000 visitors. The main theme of the exhibition was the war and everyday life in Belgium during WWI. A deep emphasis was placed on emotions with the aim of making the visitor concerned by the story of the exhibition:

“the exhibition appeals to the minds and hearts of visitors, making them both understand and feel that this history concerns them and involves them – it is *their* history”.³⁸

Building on Fisher’s formulation of the narrative paradigm, we believe that narrative persuasion constitutes a privileged medium for the study of the influence of exhibitions about WWI on pacifist attitudes. Indeed, exhibitions that rely on the value of peace may in principle influence pacifist attitudes (e.g., fostering greater pacifism) by allowing the individual to identify with characters and feel specific emotions. This leads us to formulate the following hypotheses:

Firstly, the level of pacifist attitudes of the participants will be higher after visiting the exhibition than before;
Secondly, stronger identification with characters will produce stronger pacifist attitudes.
Thirdly, stronger identification with characters will evoke stronger emotions.
Fourthly, emotions will mediate (explain part of) the relation between identification with characters and pacifist attitudes (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 here

Figure 1. Hypothesized Mediation.

³⁶ Newsletter 2015.

³⁷ Press File 2014, 10.

³⁸ Press Release 2014.

3.1. *J'avais 20 ans en 14*

We test these hypotheses using a step-by-step approach. Study 1 is conducted in the context of a historical exhibition of WWI: *J'avais 20 ans en 14*, at the Liège-Guillemins railway station. As already mentioned, it aims at investigating the effects of narrative persuasion on pacifist attitudes (Hypotheses 2 to 4).

276 Belgian participants, (124 males) were asked to fill in a paper-pencil questionnaire at the end of the exhibition. The average age is 48.62 ($SD = 32.22$). Data collection lasted for three weeks and was conducted by two experimenters at random times of the day. The questionnaire was composed of three kinds of measures: Identification with characters, emotions and pacifist attitudes.

Identification with characters: During their visit, participants were exposed to several characters (i.e., a soldier, a nurse, a child) with which they identified. The level of identification with characters during the exhibition was appraised by the identification with characters scale (EDI) adapted from Igartua and Páez.³⁹ All variables were measured on 7-point scales, ranging from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much. Given that individuals were able to identify with several characters at varying levels of intensity, identification with characters has been considered generically⁴⁰ following the procedure used by Igartua.⁴¹ Identification with characters used in the following analyses is this generic vision.

Emotions elicited by the exhibition: Three emotions experienced during the commemorative activity were measured by asking "To what extent did you feel the following emotions during your visit of the exhibition". The emotions were sadness, anger and pride.

Pacifist attitudes: The level of pacifist attitudes of the participants was measured using a French version of the Attitudes toward Peace and War Scale (APWS).⁴²

For the sake of readability, we do not present the results of statistical tests in text but rather in two tables. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1. The dominant emotion was in this case sadness. But the levels of anger and pride were also above the mid-point of the scale. With regard to Hypothesis 2, it was tested whether stronger identification with characters would produce stronger pacifist attitudes. In order to do so, a simple linear regression was run (results of the regressions are presented in Table 2). Consistent with our Hypothesis, results show that identification with characters is positively linked with pacifist attitudes. Next, we tested whether identification with characters would evoke stronger emotions during the commemorative experience. Results of a linear regression show that this is the case. The more individuals identify with characters, the more they feel sadness and anger and the less they feel pride. This brings empirical support to Hypothesis 3.

Finally, we tested whether emotions would mediate (i.e., explain) the relation between identification with characters and pacifist attitudes. In order to test this Hypothesis, we ran mediation analyses.⁴³ Results of the mediations are displayed in Table 2. They suggest that only one type of emotion, pride, partially mediates (explains) the relation between identification with characters and pacifist attitudes. Hypothesis 4 is thus only partially supported. So, what did we learn from this first study?

Study 1 was designed in order to investigate the presence of narrative persuasion mechanisms during the commemorative experience. First, it shows that the exhibition actually elicits strong emotions. It also shows that individuals do identify with characters. Next, the main contribution of Study 1 is that it replicates the basic mechanism of narrative persuasion in a brand-new field: Historical exhibition. Identification with characters is indeed significantly linked with pacifist attitudes. However, only one specific emotion (pride) successfully mediates the relation between identification with characters and pacifist attitudes. The present results also suggest that narrative persuasion would constitute an appropriate mechanism in order to explain the impact of an

³⁹ Igartua & Páez 1998.

⁴⁰ Generically means that a global level of identification has been measured, that corresponds to the aggregation of the identification with all characters the individuals have identified with.

⁴¹ Igartua 2010.

⁴² Van der Linden, Leys, Klein & Bouchat 2017.

⁴³ See Hayes 2013. In this case, mediation analyses are used to explore potential explanatory mechanisms of the relation between identification and attitudes. They are classical statistical analyses basically composed of three linear regressions.

exhibition on pacifist attitudes. However, Study 1 is characterized by a number of limitations. The first resides in the possible selection bias of the participants. Despite the presence of experimenters at various times of the day during three weeks, it is possible that a specific category of participants refused to complete the questionnaire. We try to overcome this limitation in the next studies by following classes of secondary school students. A second limitation resides in the absence of a baseline measure of pacifist attitudes. The absence of such a measure prevented us from appraising the effect of the visit on pacifist attitudes (Hypothesis 1). Moreover, as all variables were measured simultaneously, causality is difficult to establish with certainty. Such design is widespread in the study of narrative persuasion.⁴⁴ However, we try to establish causality in a more controlled design.

3.2. 14-18: *c'est notre histoire*

The next two studies were conducted in the context of the temporary exhibition *14-18: c'est notre histoire!*. Their design has been enhanced with measures taken at two times. The repeated measures design was created to appraise the evolution of pacifist attitudes after the visit (Hypothesis 1). It also allows studying the effects of narrative persuasion while controlling for the baseline level of pacifist attitudes (Hypotheses 2 to 4). Participants visited the exhibition as part of their history lessons.

In Studies 2 and 3, participants were secondary school students: French speakers in Study 2 ($N = 83$; 35 males, $M_{age} = 16.43$, $SD = .74$) and Dutch speakers in Study 3 ($N = 45$; 40 males, $M_{age} = 16.58$, $SD = .76$). Participants were asked to fill in questionnaires in their language of instruction at two measure times. A baseline measure was taken 15 days before the exhibition (at school with a paper-pencil questionnaire). They were asked to fill in a second questionnaire after their visit (in a room at the end of the exhibition). Questionnaires were matched with an individual code. Baseline measures were taken for pacifist attitudes (APWS). Then, just after the visit, participants were asked to complete again the APWS, the EDI (Identification with characters scale) and to rate to what extent they felt sadness, anger and pride during the visit.

Descriptive results are presented in Table 1. They show that participants in Studies 2 and 3 feel a different pattern of emotions than in Study 1. In this case, pride is the emotion that is felt the most intensely. Moreover, Dutch speakers report a lower mean level of emotions and of identification with characters than the French-speaking students. Such results suggest that the experience of the exhibition may have been different for the two linguistic groups. However, the impact of the visit on their level of pacifist attitudes is similar for both samples. The design of Studies 2 and 3 allows for testing the evolution of pacifist attitudes after the visit. We ran paired t-tests in order to test Hypothesis 1. Contrary to what was expected, results show that pacifist attitudes of the participants drop after visiting the exhibition (see Table 1).

Next, we used simple linear regressions in order to test Hypotheses 2 to 4. As the repeated measures design allows controlling for the baseline level of pacifist attitudes, we introduced it in the analyses. When controlling for pacifist attitudes at T1 (15 days before the visit), identification with characters is not significantly linked to pacifist attitudes at T2 (just after the visit), neither in Study 2 nor in 3. Hypothesis 2 is thus not confirmed. Next, still controlling for pacifist attitudes at T1, results of linear regressions show identification with characters is linked with the three emotions (see Table 2). Hypothesis 3 is thus confirmed in both studies. Finally, we did not run mediation analyses, given the absence of a significant link between identification and attitudes when controlling for the baseline level of pacifist attitudes. What are the additional lessons learned from these two studies?

Studies 2 and 3 were designed in order to appraise the impact of an exhibition on pacifist attitudes and to investigate the narrative persuasion processes during the commemorative activity. However, instead of confirming our insights, the present results are quite unexpected. First, descriptive statistics suggest that the experience of the exhibition may have been quite different for French and Dutch speakers. Indeed, the latter report lower levels of identification with characters and of emotions. The exhibition was presented in both languages. Still, we could suppose that the students did not experience it the same way. It is actually possible that given their cultural differences, they have been attracted by different aspects of the exhibition. They can also have identified with different characters. However, the design of the studies did not allow investigating the content of the exhibition. The role of the experience of the visit is thus an issue left open.

⁴⁴ See e.g., Hoeken & Sinkeldam 2014.

Another finding of Studies 2 and 3 is the result of the improvement of their design. The inclusion of a baseline measure of pacifist attitudes led us to reconsider the prior findings of Study 1. When a baseline measure of attitudes is taken, the effect of identification on attitudes is not significant anymore and we do not find mediation by the emotions. This absence of significant effect can be explained in at least four different ways. First, the sample size of Study 3 is small. Such a small number of observations can lead to an absence of effect per se. However, this is not the case in Study 2. Second, the inclusion of a baseline measure of attitudes is not a constant in narrative persuasion research. For instance, Hoeken and Sinkeldam⁴⁵ did not control for the baseline level of attitudes when they observed a mediating effect of specific emotions. It is thus possible that, in some situations, when not controlling for a baseline level of attitudes, narrative persuasion processes are less robust than expected. Third, the absence of a significant effect suggests that it can be quite arduous to show clear narrative persuasion processes in situations that differ from laboratory settings. Indeed, in the case of an exhibition, the participants are exposed to many different – and maybe even contradictory – messages. Moreover, as a less controlled environment, the exhibition could be characterized by an increased presence of distractors, reducing the capacity of the individuals to follow one clear message. Finally, while most studies on narrative persuasion used explicit messages, it is not especially the case for exhibitions. It is then possible that more implicit arguments would lead to an absence of clear persuasive effects.

But the most interesting results of the present studies concern the evolution of the pacifist attitudes. While the experience of the visit seems to have been different for the two groups, their participation in the exhibition is linked to a similar evolution of their level of pacifist attitudes: The mean level of pacifist attitudes is lower after the visit than 15 days before. This result is quite paradoxical given the fact that the value of peace is central in the program of the exhibition. How is such an effect possible? The Elaboration Likelihood Model (i.e., a model of persuasion from which the E-ELM is a direct extension)⁴⁶ can provide a tentative answer to this question. In this model, an attitude change in the opposite direction to that held in the message is called “boomerang effect”.⁴⁷ It is the result of the generation of more negative thoughts than positive ones about the message topic.⁴⁸ The boomerang effect may occur especially when the arguments in the message are considered weak, irrelevant, but also aversive.⁴⁹ In the case of the exhibition, it is conceivable that secondary school students did not consider the arguments presented in favour of peace/pacifism as relevant or persuasive enough to increase or even maintain their level of pacifist attitudes. They could also have perceived the message as an aversive one, leading to a decrease in their level of pacifist attitudes.

Still, recent findings could also explain this paradoxical effect. Indeed, Bouchat and colleagues⁵⁰ have shown that WWI-related indicators of victimization were linked to the current level of pacifist attitudes of young Europeans. More specifically, the death toll by country during the war is positively linked to the level of pacifist attitudes. By contrast, the presence of an ancestor who was victimized during WWI in the family of the participant was negatively linked to his level of pacifist attitudes. These results suggest that a national *ethos* of reconciliation may coexist with a vindictive logic at the individual level.

The commemorations in Belgium can also be appraised from this point of view. Indeed, most of the observed commemorations focus on the figure of the victim, whether civilian or military. Knowing that the results of the previous survey suggest that the presence of a conflict victim in their families is negatively associated with the level of pacifist attitudes of individuals, it seems useful to question the impact of commemorations that promote empathy for the victims. In the eyes of many of the protagonists involved in the commemorative field, it goes without saying that participation in commemorative activities increases – or at least does not affect – the level of pacifist attitudes of individuals. However, in line with the above results, we could assume that the commemorations that focus on the victims of the Great War and their concrete suffering will influence pacifist attitudes in a negative way. This constitutes our new Hypothesis (H1b): Commemorative activities that focus on the figure of the victim will lead to a decrease in the level of pacifist attitudes of the participants while activities that do not put a high focus on victims would not affect it. We test this Hypothesis using larger samples and via a medium allowing for more control: Historical documentaries.

⁴⁵ Hoeken & Sinkeldam 2014.

⁴⁶ Petty & Cacioppo 1986; Petty & Wegener 1999.

⁴⁷ See Petty, Briñol & Priester 2009.

⁴⁸ Byrne & Hart 2009; Petty, Wegener Fabrigar, Priester & Cacioppo 1993.

⁴⁹ Haugtvedt, Petty, Cacioppo & Steidley 1988.

⁵⁰ Bouchat et al. 2017.

4. Documentaries

Historical documentaries generally report the unfolding of important historical events. In order to do so, they often rely on the narrative form to describe the experience of ordinary individuals immersed in these events. An example is the recent TV show “Apocalypse”,⁵¹ which was aired during prime time on French television. In its first instalment, broadcast in 2014, this show described the history of World War I using colorized archives. It heavily relied on the use of personal narratives. The avowed goal of the documentary was to “preserve the memory of WWI.”

The use of the documentary format is not common in narrative persuasion studies. However, it is quite usual to use films as a medium for inducing narrative persuasion.⁵² Unlike studies in the exhibitions, the use of video material allows more control of the content of the message and of eventual distractors. We thus use WWI-related documentaries in order to test our Hypotheses.

4.1. Documentaries and focus on victims

The commemorations of the centenary have been characterized by the large-scale distribution of documentaries produced for the occasion. The following studies are based on the screening of documentaries with low-focus (Study 4) vs. high-focus on victims (Study 5). Both are Belgian documentaries about WWI in Belgium. They last for 20 minutes and are of two types. The first, *Les trois serments*⁵³ focuses on the experience of a Belgian soldier at the beginning of the war. The story is built around a letter that a grandfather wrote to his granddaughter, and alternates between past and present. It begins with a presentation of the situation in Belgium and Europe before the war. It then focuses on the invasion of Belgium by the German troops and ends with the fall of the Belgian fortress of Loncin in August 1914. Central facts are punctuated by the intervention of historians. The second extract *Les Murs de Dinant*,⁵⁴ focuses on the experience of the massacres of civilians in the town of Dinant in August 1914. It also alternates between past and present, due to the use of testimonies of descendants of victims. This second extract places a particular emphasis on the figure of the victim and the long-term consequences of the massacres. Both documentaries are privileged means of expanding individuals' knowledge of WWI. Unlike books and history classes, they offer low cost and less sober access to knowledge in terms of cognitive efforts (because of the level of illustration).

Participants in Studies 4 and 5 were university students in psychology (first year): $N = 98$; 12 males, $M_{age} = 21.25$, $SD = 6.82$ & $N = 60$; 12 males, $M_{age} = 19.42$, $SD = 1.99$. The design of the data collection is similar to the one used in Studies 2 and 3. Participants were asked to complete questionnaires 15 days before their viewing the movie and then immediately after it. The main difference was that participants were asked to fill in questionnaires in a psychology laboratory rather than in a classroom. The same measures were taken in Studies 4 and 5 as in Studies 2 and 3. Baseline measures of pacifist attitudes: (APWS); pacifist attitudes after the viewing; identification with characters in the documentary: (EDI); emotions.

First, descriptive results show that the level of sadness is quite high in both studies, but the level of pride is quite different between the samples (see Table 1). In the study with a high focus on victims, the level of pride is very low (1.56 on a 1-7 scale) while it is higher than the mid-point of the scale in the study with a low focus on victims. Results also show that participants in Study 5 (high focus) do identify less strongly with characters than participants in Study 4 (low focus). Next, we tested our new Hypothesis using paired t-tests. Consistent with it, results show that in the case of the movie with a low focus on victims (Study 4), the level of pacifist attitudes does not significantly evolve. On the contrary –and still in line with our Hypothesis – we notice a decrease in the level of pacifist attitudes after the viewing of the movie with a high focus on victims (Study 5; see Table 2). Hypothesis 1b is thus confirmed.

Next, we tested Hypotheses 2 to 4. Results are similar as in Studies 2 and 3. More specifically, when controlled for the baseline level of pacifist attitudes, identification with characters is not significantly linked with the level of pacifist attitudes after the visit. Hypothesis 2 is thus not confirmed. Then, as in the previous studies, Hypothesis 3 is mainly supported: with the exception of pride in Study 5, identification with characters is

⁵¹ Costelle & Clarke 2014.

⁵² See e.g., Costabile & Terman 2013; Igartua 2010; Igartua & Barrios 2012.

⁵³ Pireaux & Donjean 2014.

⁵⁴ Freres, Dardenne & Darteville 2014.

positively linked with emotions. Finally, given the absence of a significant relation between identification and pacifist attitudes, the Hypothesis concerning the mediation has not been tested (see Table 2).

Table 1.

Mean Levels of the Main Variables & Paired t-test Score of Pacifist Attitudes between T1 and T2.

Study	Identification Characters	Sadness	Anger	Pride	Pacifist Attitudes T1	Pacifist Attitudes T2	Score t-test
		<i>M</i> & (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) & <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) & <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> & (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> & (<i>SD</i>)	Pacifist Attitudes & (Effect Size)
1. Expo Liège		4.67 (1.25)	5.57 (1.56)	4.61 (2.11)	4.62 (1.96)	- (.80)	-
2. Expo French Brussels		4.21 (1.13)	4.26 (1.90)	3.38 (1.96)	5.05 (1.71)	5.34 (.77)	5.12 (.87) 3.66*** (.423)
3. Expo Dutch Brussels		2.86 (1.25)	3.21 (1.76)	3.05 (1.65)	3.71 (1.58)	4.76 (1.10)	4.40 (.60) 2.26* (.343)
4. Movie low victim		4.53 (1.29)	4.88 (1.50)	3.84 (1.73)	4.59 (2.05)	5.23 (.80)	5.23 (.80) .03 (0)
5. Movie high victim		3.80 (1.23)	5.07 (1.76)	3.19 (1.86)	1.56 (1.25)	5.50 (.76)	5.31 (.78) 2.89** (.370)

Notes

Numbers in the first three columns are mean scores and standard deviations. Fourth column is the paired t-test value between pacifist attitudes at T1 and T2. *: $p < .05$. **: $p < .01$. ***: $p < .001$.

Table 2.

Results of the Mediations.

	a	b	c'	c	Sobel's Z
<i>Study 1 (No control for baseline PA)</i>					
<i>Sadness</i>	.43**	.07*	.13**	.09*	1.87
<i>Anger</i>	.31**	.06*	.13**	.09*	1.68
<i>Pride</i>	.32**	-.12**	.13**	.09*	-2.61
<i>Study 2</i>					
<i>Sadness</i>	1.34**	.11	-	-.01	-
<i>Anger</i>	1.29**	.00	-	-.01	-
<i>Pride</i>	1.01**	.03	-	-.01	-
<i>Study 3</i>					
<i>Sadness</i>	.61**	-.10	-	-.03	-
<i>Anger</i>	.68**	-.04	-	-.03	-
<i>Pride</i>	.55**	.17	-	-.03	-
<i>Study 4</i>					
<i>Sadness</i>	.30*	.07	-	.05	-
<i>Anger</i>	.32*	-.03	-	.05	-
<i>Pride</i>	.56**	-.02	-	.05	-
<i>Study 5</i>					
<i>Sadness</i>	.77**	-.04	-	-.07	-

<i>Anger</i>	.74**	.04	-	-.07	-
<i>Pride</i>	.24	.03	-	-.07	-

Notes

b: path from mediator (emotions) to dependent variable (attitude); c: direct path (from identification to attitude) without mediator, c': direct path with mediator (see Figure 1). Coefficients are unstandardized regression coefficients. *: $p < .05$. **: $p < .01$.

The main goal of Studies 4 and 5 was to investigate whether portraying figures of victims during commemorative activities would influence the pacifist attitudes of the participants. Results show that in the instance of a documentary, it is the case. The vision of a documentary with a high focus on victims led to a decrease of the level of pacifist attitudes of the participants. By contrast, with respect to the documentary that was not specifically focused on the victims' experience, we did not witness a significant evolution of the pacifist attitudes. Starting from the findings by Bouchat and colleagues,⁵⁵ we could suppose that this effect is the result of identification with victimized characters, identification associated with a vindictive logic. The simultaneous presence of a message of peace whether implicit or explicit and of figures of victims to which it is possible to identify with, would therefore not be appropriate in the case of commemorations aiming at increasing the level of pacifist attitudes. This tentative explanation should be studied more systematically in future studies.

Next, Studies 4 and 5 showed that when controlling for the baseline level of pacifist attitudes, no significant effect of narrative persuasion was found. This result was not expected because the media we used is similar to the one applied in several studies on narrative persuasion.

5. General Discussion

The starting point of our approach lies in the premise that commemorations are likely to modify the knowledge and attitudes of the individuals who take part in them. After five studies on the topic, it is clear that, under certain circumstances, commemorations do not produce the desired effects. Indeed, the studies conducted lead to a set of observations that may seem surprising: Those who focus on the figure of the victim generate a decrease of the level of pacifist attitudes of the participants. This result is all the more striking as the values underlying the commemorations are often explicitly linked to peace. The paradoxical nature of this phenomenon highlights the contrast between the objectives displayed by the designers of the commemorations and the effects observed here. It also indicates the existence of a tension between, on the one hand, the valorisation of peace as an almost absolute value and, on the other hand, the accentuation of the emotional devices put in place to favour empathy of participants called to identify with the victims of war.

This point seems particularly interesting for further reflection. The expected effects of the commemorations on pacifist attitudes appear a priori to be obvious. Yet they are challenged. This finding helps reflect the expectations pursued by all the protagonists involved in this type of commemorations. Public authorities, historians who assume most of the time the status of experts, donors, artists or filmmakers certainly do not pursue the same objectives. But one of the most consensual aims is probably to promote a culture of peace, which, it is hoped, will constitute a bulwark against the repetition of past violence. This is especially the case of Flanders where the main objective of the commemorations is to promote Flanders as an international pole of peace and reconciliation.⁵⁶ Hence the need to think about the measures to adopt: if they are able to influence individual attitudes, is it in the direction of an increase or a decrease in pacifist attitudes?

⁵⁵ Bouchat et al. 2017.

⁵⁶ Wouters 2016.

The comparative analysis of commemorative activities in Belgium shows that in terms of importance and cost, none of them has ever reached the commemorations organized in 2014. The choice to bet on the emotions of the visitors reflects to some extent the expectations of the public. In any case, it reminds us that beyond the “civic” objective pursued by the public authorities, the touristic aspect of the commemorations is often at the forefront.⁵⁷ This phenomenon, which has been present in most European countries for several decades, is particularly massive.⁵⁸ Commemorations are thus considered to be sources of income by the different Belgian communities but also by a set of private actors.⁵⁹ This phenomenon is particularly marked in Flanders, where the commemorations are first of all regarded as a “total marketing product” accompanied by an “added ethical value”.⁶⁰ The Flemish authorities, and in particular the Minister of Tourism in charge of commemorations, emphasized the absurd and cruel aspects of the conflict and the absolute necessity of avoiding the repetition of the war. Such a vision is relatively consensual in the eyes of the general public. However, historians of the Great War do not fail to point out that by presenting fallen soldiers as “passive victims” crushed by the war machine, commemorations erase the dimensions of commitment and consent to the war.⁶¹ As for the impact of such a vision on pacifist attitudes, this reflection calls for great caution.

In a next step, our study aimed at exploring the mechanisms responsible for the paradoxical effect of the commemorations of WWI on pacifist attitudes. Building on the narrative paradigm,⁶² we considered the commemorative activities (i.e., exhibitions and documentaries) as conveyors of persuasive messages. Given the wide use of emotions and characters by the designers of the commemorations in order to reinforce the implication of the participants, we considered that the narrative persuasion model would be well suited for explaining the attitude change of the participants. Indeed, the narrative persuasion model gives a central role to the identification with characters in the persuasion process. More specifically, identifying with characters would lead to attitude change by decreasing the ability of the participants to counter-argue. And the emotions experienced during the commemorative activity would play the role of mediator of this relation. However, the results of the different studies do not support our hypotheses. When controlling for the baseline level of pacifist attitudes, identification with characters does not significantly predict the level of pacifist attitudes after the commemoration. Several explanations have been advanced in order to explain these unexpected results: presence of a control measure of the baseline level of pacifist attitudes, “noises” inherent to ecological situations, and the inability of the narrative persuasion model for appraising the attitude change during the commemorative process. None of these explanations being completely satisfying, one could suppose that the narrative persuasion mechanism is not appropriate to account for the commemorative experience.

6. Conclusion

The present chapter revealed that the effects of commemorations are sometimes quite paradoxical. However, it is not without limitations. The first resides in the restricted number of commemorative activities studied: two documentaries and two exhibitions. Even if the exhibitions were two of the most visited in Belgium and the documentaries were seen by a large number of people, commemorations are not limited to these media. The study of ceremonies, for instance, could reveal precious information on the collective dynamics at stake in the commemorations (here, we think especially about the role of collective emotions). A second limitation lies in the limited diversity of the samples. Indeed, the Dutch-speaking group of participants seemed less involved in the exhibition than their French-speaking counterparts (they identified less with characters and experienced a lower level of emotions). The inclusion of groups of participants from diverse generations and cultures (especially participants from immigrant origins) could help nuance our results. Finally, the content of the exhibitions and documentaries and the singular experience of the visit/viewing for each participant were not addressed. However, recent works suggest that these factors are of the utmost importance in the study of the impacts of the exhibitions.⁶³ Here, this is paradoxically the fact of not having sufficiently contextualized the commemorative experience, which reminds us of how contextualization is critical in the study of attitudes.

⁵⁷ See Bost & Kesteloot 2014; Wouters 2016.

⁵⁸ Iles 2008; Loyd 2014; Winter 2014.

⁵⁹ See e.g., Wouters 2016.

⁶⁰ Bost & Kesteloot 2014.

⁶¹ Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker 2000.

⁶² Fisher 1987.

⁶³ See Gensburger, Antichan, Teboul & Torterat 2016.

The commemorations of the centenary of WWI constituted an unprecedented event by the number and type of activities organized. These were a popular success and attracted a wide and diverse audience. The results we obtained through these five studies therefore reflect only a minimal part of the reality of the commemorative experience. Nevertheless, by highlighting the sometimes paradoxical effects of the commemorative activities, they confirm the relevance of a social psychological approach in the study of commemorations.

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