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Does the emotional framing of narratives influence attitudes? Evidence from second-hand testimonies on WWII collaboration and repression

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Abstract

In today's ultra-connected world, personal and emotional narratives are omnipresent in media. This study examines how the emotional framing of second-hand testimonies about difficult or controversial past events influences attitudes. A sample of 154 Belgian participants, aged 18–77, evaluated their attitudes regarding Second World War (WWII) collaboration with Nazi Germany and the post-war repression before and after reading either the positively framed or negatively framed version of an ecologically valid interview. The narrative revolved around a son recounting his father's past as a former collaborator joining the German forces during WWII. Results revealed a significant influence of the narrative's emotional frame on attitudes towards collaboration and repression. The positively framed interview promoted more understanding attitudes towards collaboration and nuanced views on repression, while the opposite occurred with the negatively framed story, where participants viewed collaboration less favourably and regarded repression as justified and moral. Nevertheless, the role of emotions needs further investigation, exploring the medium of presentation of the narrative and considering the development of first-person narratives to elicit stronger emotional reactions.

Keywords: narrative paradigm; testimony; emotions; attitude change; WWII; social psychology

Introduction

Human life is deeply rooted in narratives. We engage in discussion, sharing our experiences and those of others to nurture meaningful connections with peers, comprehend the world, and construct our sense of self (Cherry, 1966; Fisher, 1985; May, 2004). In today's ultra-connected world, the need to share personal and emotional experiences is particularly present. Testimonies often recount past events that resonate with present concerns grounded in one's cultural background, history, and collective memory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Hogg and Turner, 1987; Liu and Hilton, 2005; Dresler-Hawke and Liu, 2006; Klein et al., 2012; Bouchat et al., 2016; Hogg, 2016; Hirst et al., 2018; Van Bergen et al., 2024). Featured in the media, museums, and exhibitions, they create deeply personal connections between

narrator and audience, as well as to history (Bouchat *et al.*, 2016; Van Bergen *et al.*, 2024). Amidst this rich landscape of narratives, encountered testimonies either echo or diverge from collective memories. How do we navigate these narratives and discern their impact on our attitudes, particularly when they revolve around controversial episodes? This question sparked our reflection on the power of personal, emotional narratives within collective memory in modern media (i.e., the digital and interactive forms of communication that have evolved with advancements in technology, including text, audio, and audiovisual formats on social media).

The power of narratives

The way humans communicate through oral and written language, stepping outside the 'here and now', enables us to refer to the past and learn from prior experiences. This competence gives rise to *Homo narrans*, the storytelling human. Recognising the power of stories, Fisher (1985) designed the narrative paradigm to highlight the influence that can be derived from narratives and memories. People integrate others' attitudes and experiences to organise the environment and mobilise relevant information to guide behaviour. Attitudes are evaluations towards people, objects, actions, or ideas that are held in memory (Bouchat *et al.*, 2016; Yzerbyt and Klein, 2019). In essence, Fisher's narrative paradigm frames human communication as fundamentally story-based, with narratives serving as the primary means through which we make sense of our world and experiences.

A narrative is a representation of connected events and characters with a particular sequence, related from a particular perspective and containing implicit or explicit messages about a theme (May, 2004; Volkman and Parrott, 2012). Narratives shape attitudes by fostering reliability and enhancing the experience-taking processes (ie, transportation and character identification; Fisher, 1985; Hirst *et al.*, 2018; Shaffer *et al.*, 2018). Transportation is a mental process in which the audience is temporarily immersed in a narrative world, losing access to the real one. Research has found that the more a person is transported into the storied world, the more their attitudes are influenced towards story-consistent beliefs (Green and Brock, 2000; Murphy *et al.*, 2013; Hoeken and Sinkeldam, 2014). Character identification occurs when individuals feel compassion and imagine themselves as the narrative's character, adopting their goals and feeling their emotions (Tal-Or and Cohen, 2010).

When immersed in a narrative, the audience perceives no motivation to elaborate on their own knowledge, thoughts, or to look critically at the narrative. Instead, they rely on heuristics, such as emotions, to align their attitudes with those depicted in the narrative (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; de Graaf *et al.*, 2009; van Kleef *et al.*, 2011; Volkman and Parrott, 2012; Murphy *et al.*, 2013; Hoeken and Sinkeldam, 2014; van Kleef and Côté, 2022).

In our media-rich environment, testimonies tend to go viral through the sharing of emotional experiences, which are more likely to be shared, repeated, and elaborated upon in everyday conversations (Rimé, 1995; Richardson and Schankweiler, 2020). Emotions are adaptive signals indicating one's interests and needs (Frijda, 2001; Damasio, 2011; Luminet and Cordonnier, 2024). Consequently, emotional narratives direct attention to individuals' own emotional reactions and bias cognitive responses, working as powerful sources of social influence (van Kleef *et al.*, 2011; Volkman and Parrott, 2012). In that line, emotional narratives are more likely to provoke stronger and more persistent changes in attitude than historical facts (Hirst *et al.*, 2018). Morris *et al.* (2019) demonstrated that narratives, especially those with negatively valenced endings, have a greater impact on pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours than factual accounts due to heightened emotional arousal: the higher the emotional arousal, the more attention and encoding of information into working memory is increased, thereby enhancing pro-environmental responses (Shaffer *et al.*, 2018; Joseph *et al.*, 2020).

Even though this study relied on pro-environmental stories, we expect personal and emotional narratives about family memories to be susceptible to the same influences. However, very few models on narrative persuasion have integrated emotional dimensions, such as valence or discrete emotions, as independent components (Dillard and Peck, 2001; van Kleef *et al.*, 2011; Shaffer *et al.*, 2018; Luminet, 2022). Discrete or specific emotions reflect unique person–environment relationships, favouring particular appraisal patterns, thereby acting differently on attitudes (Villalobos and Sirin, 2017).

The present study

Through Fisher's narrative paradigm, it is clear that emotionally charged personal stories wield significant persuasion power. However, further research is needed to understand their influence on attitudes and the underlying mechanisms. The difficult topic of collaboration during WWII offers an opportunity to explore how the emotional framing of personal narratives can influence attitudes regarding a controversial past (Bouchat *et al.*, 2016, 2021). In Belgium, during the German occupation (1940–1944), pro-Nazi and anti-communist parties – the Flemish National Union (Vlaams Nationaal Verbond) in Flanders and the Rexist party in Wallonia – formed military legions, that fought on the Eastern Front alongside the Wehrmacht. After the war, collaborators who worked with the German occupying forces were persecuted on the streets (popular repression), in private sectors, and by the state (military courts). In contrast to other countries, amnesty – a political measure that pardons and erases committed actions and offences – has not been granted to former collaborators (Aerts *et al.* 2017; CegeSoma n.d.). This underscores that the history of collaboration remains a highly polarised and complex topic in Belgium. Furthermore, since the 1990s, representations of this past have increasingly linked collaboration to the Holocaust, while paying less attention to other forms of collaboration, such as military collaboration against communism on the Eastern Front (Ballière, 2024). This makes it a particularly relevant test case for examining the influence of personal narratives and bringing nuance to a topic that still divides Belgian public opinion today.

This study aims to investigate whether the emotional frame (positively valenced vs negatively valenced) of a personal narrative about a Belgian Eastern Front volunteer during WWII affects audience attitudes concerning collaboration and its repression (i.e., legal and social repression of collaborators after the war), mediated by induced emotions (Figure 1). The ecologically valid narrative, derived from authentic interviews with family members of former collaborators, features a magazine interview with the son of a former collaborator testifying about his father's past as an Eastern Front Volunteer, accompanied by two
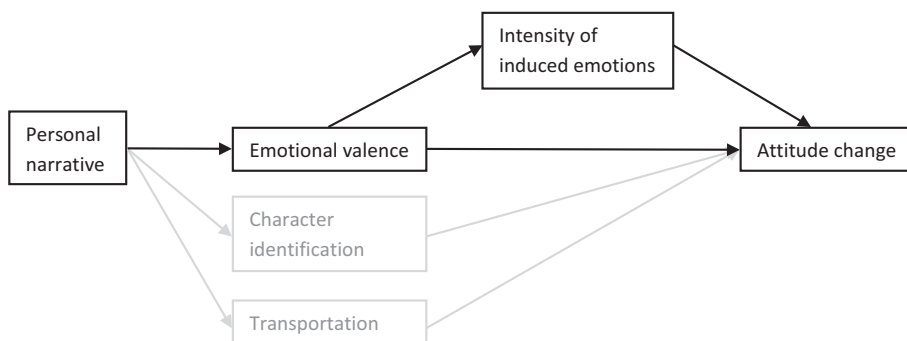

Figure 1. A hypothetical model for the influence of personal narratives on the audience's attitude change.

wartime photographs. We created two versions of the interview, portraying either positive or negative feelings about the father's past (Figures 2 and 3, respectively).

We formulate the following hypotheses. First, the emotional valence of the personal narrative will influence the direction of attitude change. The positively valenced account will lead to a more supportive attitude towards collaboration and to less understanding attitudes towards repression, while the negatively valenced account will produce the opposite effect (H1). Second, the influence of the narrative's emotional valence on attitude change is mediated by the intensity of specific emotions induced in the audience (H2). While specific induced emotions are expected to influence the direction of attitude change, which emotions and their required intensity remain debated due to the variability in emotional responses. As such, this hypothesis is exploratory.

Methods

Participants

To measure changes in attitudes, our study relied on two online questionnaires on Qualtrics available in Dutch or French, presented at least 7 days apart (M = 8.19; SD = 2.60). Of the 335 participants who completed the first questionnaire, 161 proceeded to complete the second questionnaire. One participant's answer sheet could not be paired due to mis-matched codes. Six participants were discarded as they were non-Belgians, which did not meet the inclusion criteria: holding Belgian citizenship. The final sample consisted of 121 French-speaking and 33 Dutch-speaking Belgian adult participants (84 women and 70 men, M_{age} = 42.20, SD_{age} = 16.88). In Belgium, the two main linguistic communities (Dutch- and French-speaking) present distinct contexts. However, as baseline attitudes showed no significant differences between the groups, the data were analysed as a single sample. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' main characteristics. Recruitment occurred via social media and email, between June 25 and July 17, 2023.

Figure 2. Positively valenced interview translated for the purpose of this article.

My father was a collaborator

TESTIMONY

To mark the anniversary of the end of the Second World War, we met Jean, the son of a former collaborator who left to fight on the Eastern Front in support of the Nazi forces opposing those of the Soviet Union. His career began in the *rexiste* youth, a youth movement created by the nationalist, anti-communist Rex party led by Léon Degrelle, and now a symbol of collaboration. In an exclusive interview, Jean told us his father's story.

He said the worst thing that could happen to Belgium was for the Russians to invade us. More excuses... But I remember that my father still struggled to keep his stare, because he knew what I was thinking: "How could he have missed the heinous and violent acts committed by the nazis against his friends, his neighbours, his "undesirable" compatriots according to Hitler?" Me, I think he deliberately turned a blind eye.

He then went on to tell how, at the end of the war, he found himself in Germany where he was captured and imprisoned by the Allies. He said it was in a former concentration camp. Then the Allies handed them over to the Belgians. My father always said "fortunately, not in the first wave of returns", because he thinks he would not have made it...

he would have been sentenced to death. Apparently it was his young age that saved him, despite the horror of his actions. Indeed, it was 1945 when he was imprisoned in Belgium. He was 19, so still a minor for the time.

He told me about his memories of prison. He lamented his time in the cells, the food and the lack of comfort. He said that he had not been mistreated, but that it was not a holiday camp either. He went on and on, but I was not listening anymore because I thought "How dare he put himself forward as the victim when he was the executioner, it's the world upside down!" I was outraged. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. But in reality, he was only imprisoned for 2 years. Can you imagine? Just 2 years.

> One evening I went to find my father with a picture. I wanted to confront him with his lies.

And I said to him, "You lied to me when you pretended you had not done your military service. How come you're in uniform? Listen, I want to know, I need to know the truth!" It was then that he finally confessed to me: "Well, a long time ago, I was in the *rexist* youth and I fought on the Eastern Front." He remained impassive, no tears... nothing. It was an extremely difficult moment for me. I remember being overwhelmed by anger. Instantly, I understood that he had made an historic mistake and I wondered about his intentions. Of course, he tried to justify his behaviour by saying that he had never supported nazism, but his actions testified to the contrary.

My father was not a bad man, although he was sometimes arrogant. He had his faults. For a start, he had lied about his past. But he was very cultured. He went to school, and that is where he began to oppose communism. He recounted that in 1939, the *rexist* party was an important political movement. Except that he did not mention the toxic side of the ideology of *rexist* youth and its fascist values. He said: "You know the parades and rallies with torches and flag-bearers, it was fascinating for a 14-15 year old boy. I was craving adventure and I said to myself, why not go to war..." So he volunteered to fight on the Eastern Front within the Wehrmacht. And why did he sign up? According to him, it was to fight communism.

Figure 3. Negatively valenced interview translated for the purpose of this article.

Procedure

A first questionnaire gathered demographic information and baseline attitudes towards WWII collaboration and subsequent repression. Seven days later, participants received an email inviting them to answer the second questionnaire, with a reminder sent 3 days later to non-respondents. The second questionnaire included an interview framed by two wartime photographs from archival sources (CegeSoma 1942) to maximise ecological validity and emphasise real-world relevance. Participants were randomly assigned to either the positively or negatively valenced condition. Questions regarding transportation, identification, emotions, and attitudes followed.

To guarantee anonymity, participants created a personal code linking both questionnaires. Participation was voluntary, with signed informed consent. Two respondents were each awarded a €100 voucher. The study's procedure and questionnaires were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Commission of the Institute for Research in Psychological Sciences (UCLouvain).

Materials

This section outlines the measures used in both questionnaires in order of appearance. Unless specified, items were assessed on 5-point scales from 1: *strongly disagree* to 5: *strongly agree*).

Questionnaire 1

The first section is *Demographics*: gender, age, educational level, political orientation, family involvement in WWII collaboration or resistance, subjective knowledge and interest in WWII collaboration, and repression. The measure *Attitudes regarding WWII collaboration and*

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on the sample

Measures	Participants (N = 154)
Native language	
Dutch	33
French	121
Sex	
Women	84
Men	70
Non-binary	0
Age	M_{age} = 42.20
	SD = 16.876
Highest diploma (%)	
Primary school	0.6
Secondary school	8.4
Bachelor	21.4
Master	56.5
Postgraduate	10.4
Doctorate	2.6
Political orientation (%)	
Extreme left	1.3
Left	6.5
Centre-left	19.5
Centre	20.8
Centre-right	37
Right	14.9
Extreme right	0
Subjective level of knowledge (%)	
Very low	13
Low	34.4
Medium	36.4
High	13
Very high	3.2

(Continued)

Table 1 *Continued*

Measures	Participants (*N* = 154)
Subjective level of interest (%)	
Very low	4.5
Low	11.7
Medium	42.9
High	33.1
Very high	7.8
Collaboration in family (%)	
Yes	7.1
No	71.4
Do not know	21.4
Resistance in family (%)	
Yes	51.9
No	20.1
Do not know	27.9

subsequent repression includes nine items inspired by Bouchat et al.'s research (2021). Four items refer to attitudes towards former collaborators, covering responsibility, victimisation, morality, and necessity (e.g., 'I have the impression that during WWII and the repression that followed, collaborators particularly suffered'). Another four items address attitudes towards repression, including victimisation, morality, and necessity (e.g., 'I think that under certain circumstances the repression of collaborators was too severe'). The final item, 'Today, Belgians are still suffering from what happened during WWII and the events that followed', captures the attitude towards the ongoing impact of the past on the present.

Questionnaire 2

Transportation measures participants' subjective experience and comprises five items, based on Cordonnier *et al.* (2018); e.g., 'When I was reading the text, I was totally absorbed in the story'. *Character identification* includes seven items adapted from de Graaf *et al.* (2009), assessing identification with the character who collaborated (the father) and the narrator (the son). For example, 'As I read the text, I imagined myself in the shoes of the father/ the son who collaborated'. *Induced emotions.* We first assess the overall emotional intensity (from 0: *no intensity* to 4: *very high intensity*), then the overall (un)pleasantness felt when reading the interview (from 1: *very unpleasant* to 5: *very pleasant*). Consequently, in line with the discrete-emotion approach, participants indicate the level of intensity (from 0: *not felt* to 4: *felt very intensely*) on a list of emotions they might have felt while reading: happiness, sadness, shame, pride, anger, guilt, disdain, gratitude, feeling of injustice, feeling of abandonment, disgust, fear and compassion. These emotions were selected based on their relevance to the topic of collaboration and repression. Moreover, emotions are measured twice to distinguish between emotions experienced at the individual and then at the collective level. *Level of*

identification with Belgium contains seven items, inspired by Bouchat *et al.* (2021), measuring participants' pride and attachment to Belgium.

Interviews

A key element was prioritising narratives with high ecological validity. We integrated second-hand testimonies of five children of former collaborators collected by the last author in a previous project - the TRANSMEMO project that examined the intergenerational transmission of memories linked to the Second World War in the families of collaborators and members of the resistance. We represented them as faithfully as possible to preserve authenticity, better capturing the historical context and enhancing real-world relevance. We developed a positively valenced and a negatively valenced version of the interview, nearly identical in sentence structure and word count but with intentional differences in emotional tone (Figures 2 and 3). The interviews were translated into Dutch by one of the researchers and subsequently reviewed by two native Dutch-speakers. We conducted a pre-test (*N* = 11) to evaluate the similarity between the different conditions (positive vs negative and Dutch vs French translation) and found comparable levels of character identification, transportation, and emotional intensity.

Results

Preliminary results

Table 2 displays correlations between attitudes regarding collaboration and repression at pre- and post-test and participants' characteristics. Age, subjective level of knowledge, level of identification with Belgium, and family involvement in the resistance significantly vary with attitudes at pre- and post-test. In particular, older participants held less favourable views on collaboration and saw repression as more justified and moral. This aligns with prior research linking attitudes to generational belonging (Bouchat et al., 2021).

Table 3 presents descriptive measures of the variables in relation to the narrative's emotional valence. Participants identified less with the collaborationist father (*M* = 2.64, SD = 1.01) than with the son who narrates the story (*M* = 3.56, SD = 0.97; Table 3). As the correlation between both variables is not significant (r_s = 0.098, *p* = .229), we will examine them separately: 'Character identification father' and 'Character identification son'. Regarding the overall intensity of induced emotions, the reported intensity was generally low.

The influence of the emotional valence on attitude change

We conducted a linear regression to test whether the emotional valence of a personal narrative about a Belgian Eastern Front volunteer influenced attitude change (assessed by computing the difference between pre- and post-attitudes for each item). In addition, age, subjective level of knowledge, level of identification with Belgium, and resistance in family were included as predictors because these variables correlated significantly with the majority of the attitudes' variables regarding collaboration and repression.

As hypothesised, the emotional valence of personal narratives influenced the direction of attitude change: $F(1, 148)$ = 20.81, PRE = 0.13, *p* = <.001 (Figure 4). The positively framed interview led to more positive attitudes towards collaborators and a more nuanced view on repression (M_{att_change} = 0.12, SD = 0.37), while the negatively framed interview demonstrated a significant impact in the opposite direction, leading to less favourable attitudes towards collaboration and regarding repression as more justified and moral (M_{att_change} = −0.14, SD = 0.37). None of the control variables emerged as statistically significant predictors for attitude change.

Table 2. Spearman's correlations between attitudes (towards collaboration and repression) and sample characteristics

Measures	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.
1. PRE-Attitude total	1	.595**	.708**	.721**	.518**	.532**	−.064	.071	−.334**	−.072	.043	−.205*	−.187*	−.184*	−.089	.389**
2. PRE-Attitude-collaboration		1	.558**	.498**	.719**	.506**	−.019	−.097	−.417**	−.113	−.005	−.177*	.014	−.273*	−.039	.279**
3. PRE-Attitude-repression			1	.531**	.480**	.664**	−.185*	.051	−.339**	−.085	.010	−.144	−.043	−.131	.037	.247**
4. POST-Attitude				1	.697**	.714**	.001	−.004	−.383**	−.076	.065	−.208**	−.156	−.223**	−.045	.416**
5. POST-Attitude-collaboration					1	.649**	.024	−.039	−.499**	−.200*	.082	−.210**	−.045	−.169*	−.075	.286**
6. POST-Attitude-repression						1	−.090	.008	−.337**	−.095	.030	−.139	−.002	−.212**	−0.002	.286**
7. Native language							1	−.095	−.019	.047	.131	−.202*	−.171*	.181*	.224**	−.195*
8. Sex								1	.147	−.068	.202*	.193*	.041	.086	−.051	−.036
9. Age									1	.189*	.116	.280*	−.010	.154	−.089	−.284**
10. Highest diploma										1	.014	.000	−.013	.041	−.011	−.069
11. Political orientation											1	.044	.028	.148	−.011	−.068
12. Subjective knowledge												1	.459**	−.001	−.285**	−.223**
13. Subjective interest													1	−.096	−.232**	−.047
14. Identification with Belgium														1	.046	−.336**
15. Collaboration in family															1	.014
16. Resistance in family																1

Note: Spearman's correlations were used as the variables are ordinal in nature, except for age. PRE-Attitude = global attitude at pre-test; PRE-Attitude-collaboration = attitude towards collaboration at pre-test (1 = negative; 5 = positive); PRE-Attitude-repression = attitude towards repression at pre-test (1 = positive; 5 = negative); POST-Attitude = global attitude at post-test; POST-Attitude-collaboration = attitude towards collaboration at post-test; POST-Attitude-repression = attitude towards repression at post-test (1 = positive; 5 = negative); Native language (−1 = Dutch; 1 = French); Sex (1 = Woman; 2 = Man); Highest diploma (1 = primary education; 5 = doctorate); political orientation (1 = extreme left; 5 = extreme right); Level of subjective knowledge and interest (1 = very low; 5 = very high); Level of identification with Belgium (1 = very low; 5 = very high); Collaboration in family (1 = yes; 2 = no/do not know); Resistance in family (1 = yes; 2 = no/do not know); **$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed); *$p < 0.05$ (two-tailed).

Table 3. Descriptive measures on the variables in relation to the emotional valence of the narrative

Variable (scale)	Negatively valenced (N = 77) M (SD)	Positively valenced (N = 77) M (SD)
Transportation into storied world (1–5)	3.49 (0.61)*	3.79 (0.48)*
Identification with father (1–5)	2.19 (0.89)*	3.08 (0.94)*
Identification with son (1–5)	3.69 (0.91)	3.43 (1.01)
Intensity of induced emotions at individual level (0–4)	1.79 (0.95)	1.99 (0.80)
Intensity of induced emotions at collective level (0–4)	1.57 (0.95)	1.73 (1.00)
Overall valence of induced emotions at individual level (1–5)	2.97 (0.63)	3.023(0.69)
Overall valence of induced emotions at collective level (1–5)	2.96 (0.72)	2.92 (0.68)
PRE-attitude total (1–5)	2.91 (0.50)	2.78 (0.56)
PRE-attitude collaboration (1–5)	2.33 (0.67)	2.82 (0.66)
PRE-attitude repression (1–5)	2.49 (0.73)	2.30 (0.75)
POST-attitude total (1–5)	2.78 (0.47)	2.84 (0.59)
POST-attitude collaboration (1–5)	2.17 (0.69)	2.36 (0.68)
POST-attitude repression (1–5)	2.34 (0.78)	2.51 (0.76)
Attitude change total (−5–5)	−0.14 (0.37)*	0.12 (0.37)*
Attitude change collaboration (−5–5)	−0.16 (0.50)*	0.08 (0.41)*
Attitude change repression (−5–5)	−0.15 (0.55)*	0.22 (0.57)*

Note: Negative and positive = emotional valence of the interview; PRE-attitude = global attitude at pre-test; PRE-attitude-collaboration = attitude towards collaboration at pre-test; PRE-attitude-repression = attitude towards repression at pre-test; POST-attitude = global attitude at post-test; POST-attitude-collaboration = attitude towards collaboration at post-test; POST-attitude-repression = attitude towards repression at post-test; Scales from 1 to 5, except for induced emotions (0: *no intensity* to 4: *very strong intensity*) and overall valence of induced emotions (1: *very unpleasant*, 3: *medium*, 5: *very pleasant*); N = sample size; M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Means in the same row marked with * differ at $p < .05$ by the Bonferroni method.

In addition, emotional valence influenced attitude change regarding collaboration and repression in the same direction, whether analysed individually or together, with respective test values of $F(1,148) = 8.91$, PRE = 0.10, $p = .003$ and $F(1,48) = 20.04$, PRE = 0.13, $p = <.001$. The negatively valenced interview resulted in mean levels of attitude change of −0.16 (SD = 0.50) for collaboration and − 0.15 (SD = 0.55) for repression, while the positively valenced interview led to changes of 0.08 (SD = 0.41) and 0.22 (SD = 0.57), respectively (Table 3).

According to the model we constructed based on Fisher's narrative paradigm (Figure 1), transportation into the storied world and character identification (both with the father and the son) should also predict attitude change after controlling for the previously mentioned factors. Results showed that character identification with the son was not significant: $F(1, 148) = 1.14$, PRE = 0.02, $p = .288$ with $B_{ID\_Son} = 0.038$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [−0.032–0.107]. However, transportation and character identification with the father significantly predicted attitude change, respectively $F(1, 148) = 7.63$, PRE = 0.06, $p = .006$ and F
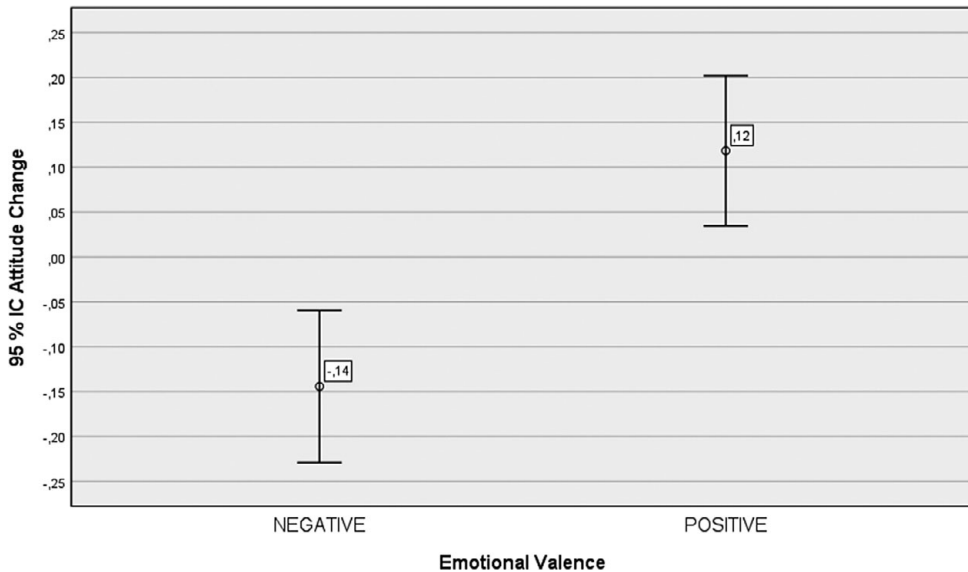
Figure 4. Graph of the model representing attitude change as a function of emotional valence.

(1,148) = 8.02, PRE = 0.06, p = .005. The higher the degree of transportation and character identification with the father, the bigger the change in attitude ($B_{\text{Transportation}}$ = 0.151, 95% CI [0.043, 0.259]; $B_{\text{ID\_Father}}$ = 0.088, 95% CI [0.027–0.150]). Although character identification was higher for the narrating son than for the father on average, only identification with the father significantly predicted attitude change.

To test the robustness of emotional valence in conjunction with transportation and identification with the father, as they are predictors within Fisher's narrative paradigm, we performed a linear regression combining them and controlling for the same factors. The results demonstrated that emotional valence plays a major role in predicting attitude change towards collaboration and repression, as it was the only predictor remaining significant: F(1,146) = 12.82, PRE = 0.16, p = <.001.

The mediating role of discrete emotions

The second hypothesis explored the mediating role of induced discrete emotions on the relationship between the emotional valence of a narrative and attitudes towards collaboration and repression. For this purpose, the fourth model of the PROCESS macro extension on SPSS was used (Hayes, 2022). The results provided insights into the direct, indirect, and total effects of emotional valence on attitude change in the presence of the mediating variable: intensity of a specific induced emotion. We introduced the discrete emotions experienced at least at minimal levels by participants (i.e., above 1) as mediating factors in the model: sadness, shame, anger, disdain, injustice, disgust, and compassion. The findings revealed no significant indirect effects. This means that no conclusion can be drawn regarding the mediating role of these discrete emotions on attitude change towards collaboration and repression.

Discussion

This study investigates how the emotional framing of a second-hand testimony about a Belgian Eastern Front volunteer during WWII shapes Belgians' attitudes towards collaboration

and repression. Through the lens of emotions, we applied Fisher's narrative paradigm to second-hand testimonies about a controversial past and explored the social implications of using emotional and personal narratives in media to shape attitudes.

The results confirmed the hypothesis that emotional framing affects attitude change. In the interview where the son expressed understanding for his father's past (positive valence), participants became more tolerant of collaboration and more critical of repression, viewing it as overly harsh. Conversely, in the interview where the son expressed anger and disgust (negative valence), participants viewed collaboration less favourably and regarded repression as justified and moral. These findings support the idea that emotionally framed information significantly influences attitudes.

While emotional narratives personalise history and encourage dialogue about difficult pasts (Bouchat *et al.*, 2016; Erll and Hirst, 2023; Van Bergen *et al.*, 2024), which might be instrumental in collective memory construction (Rosoux, 2021), they can also be used manipulatively, particularly in a digital age dominated by (mis)information and echo chambers (Kligler-Vilenchik *et al.*, 2014). The misuse of these narratives risks exacerbating divisions, especially on difficult and controversial topics (e.g., wars of communication; Smoor, 2017). As such, it becomes imperative to continue exploring their effects, recognising both their potential to engage the public with significant historical pasts and the risks they pose for manipulation (Wertsch, 2002; Hoeken and Sinkeldam, 2014).

However, the overall change in attitude was modest, with emotional valence accounting for only 13 per cent of the observed change in attitudes. When including transportation into the storied world and identification with the father in the model, emotional valence emerged as the only significant variable, explaining 16 per cent of attitude change. These results underscore the value of incorporating emotional dimensions into narrative models and the need for further research to enhance their explanatory power (Green and Brock, 2000; de Graaf *et al.*, 2009; Murphy *et al.*, 2013). This is particularly relevant given that, contrary to findings in the existing but limited literature, the mediating effect of discrete induced emotions did not yield significant results. The emotional framing is expected to induce emotions in the audience by increasing interest and focussing attention on their own emotional reactions, which enhances memory encoding and leads to lasting changes in attitudes (Holland and Kensinger, 2010; Volkman and Parrott, 2012; Murphy *et al.*, 2013; Hoeken and Sinkeldam, 2014; Morris *et al.*, 2019). The non-significant results may reflect the relatively low intensity of induced emotions, possibly influenced by the narrative's second-hand account and text-based medium. A meta-analysis showed that films are more effective at inducing emotions than readings (Joseph *et al.*, 2020). However, studies on narrative communication have yielded mixed results regarding the most persuasive format, often examining cognitive and emotional mediators separately (Joseph *et al.*, 2020; Oschatz and Marker, 2020).

Although participants seemed to identify more with the son of the former collaborator, our data indicate that identification with the father figure, the Eastern Front volunteer himself, better predicted attitude change towards collaboration and repression. Future research could benefit from developing autobiographical first-person narratives through video interviews. Allowing the person directly involved to express their emotions authentically could evoke a stronger emotional response from the audience, enabling a more detailed examination of the interplay between emotional valence, emotional responses, and attitude change.

Conclusion

As storytelling humans, we shape our identities, social relationships, and perceptions of the world by discussing and remembering the past to navigate our future. This study improves

our understanding of how the emotional framing of a personal narrative about a former Belgian Eastern Front volunteer during WWII influences audience attitudes towards collaboration and repression. The positively valenced interview promoted more understanding attitudes regarding collaboration and nuanced views on repression, while the opposite occurred with the negatively valenced story. The results imply that the emotional framing of storytelling may, though modestly, challenge attitudes about a difficult past rooted in collective memories. Nevertheless, the role of emotions needs further investigation, particularly through the development of first-person narratives to elicit stronger emotional reactions. Furthermore, future research should explore other dimensions, such as the medium of narrative presentation, which plays a crucial role in today's media landscape and in how history is taught in schools.

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