Mnemonic differences and similarities across opposing social groups: The linguistic conflict at the University of Leuven as a case study

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\textbf{A B S T R A C T}

In the 1960s, a historical event occurred at one of Europe’s most prestigious universities: The Dutch-speaking students forced the French-speaking students to relocate and establish their own university. We compared the extent to which members of each social group developed elaborate memories of the events surrounding the conflict and whether they were associated with differences in rehearsal type (media, conversational, rumination) and initiating conditions (importance, political engagement, and negative/positive emotions). All participants were university students at the time of the conflict. We found that Dutch-speakers exhibited more elaborate memories compared to French-speakers and that importance was associated with elaborate memories only for the Dutch-speakers. However, positive emotions appear to be critical in the formation of elaborate memories across the social groups. We found no such associations for negative emotions. We discuss these results in terms of the social/cognitive processes transcending social group membership in understanding how individuals remember past conflicts.

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People who personally experience public events often form long lasting memories of these events (Pillemer, 2009). These memories can then help shape both the individuals’ autobiographical memories and the community’s collective memories and, in turn, the individual’s and the community’s collective identity (Hirst & Manier, 2008; Pillemer, 1992, 1998, 2003). Memory researchers traditionally interested in public events have typically examined what are known as “flashbulb memories” (FBMs). FBMs occur when individuals are able to vividly recollect, over a long period of time, the context in which they learned about the event (Brown & Kulik, 1977). In most instances, though, these individuals did not experience the FBM-inducing event itself, only the circumstances in which they learned about the event.

In this study, we depart from most of the work on FBM and focus on those instances in which one directly experienced the event. In such cases, the autobiographical memory is of the event itself, not the circumstance of learning of the event. People can learn about an event from afar, as much of the world did when they learned about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Here we might classify this event as semantic, rather than strictly autobiographical, inasmuch as it is about the facts of the event rather than the experience of living through the event. Alternatively, people can play a direct role in the unfolding event – as those at Ground Zero no doubt did. They experience the event itself rather than learning about it indirectly. A number of researchers are beginning to emphasize the importance of this distinction between “autobiographical event memory” and “semantic event memory” (Er, 2003; Manier & Hirst, 2008; Neisser et al., 1996; Pillemer, 2009). Few, however, have systematically studied autobiographical event memory, that is, memories for an emotionally charged, directly experienced, public event. Building on the FBM literature, we focus here on two issues: (1) whether an emotionally charged, directly experienced, public event elicits elaborate memories and (2) the factors that might affect the degree to which these memories are elaborate. FBMs are often thought to be more elaborate than “ordinary” autobiographical memories (see Talarico & Rubin, 2007, for a review). This elaborateness is often thought to be predicated on a variety of factors, e.g., the event’s relation to an individual’s social identity (Berntsen, 2009; Brown & Kulik, 1977; Curci, Luminet, Finkenaouer, & Gisel, 2001; Kvavilashvili, Mirani, Schlagman, & Kornbrot, 2003; Luminet & Curci, 2009; see also Sahdra & Ross, 2007); the event’s perceived importance (Er, 2003), the degree to which it is rehearsed

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Thus, the present study is a rarity in the literature in that we examine the memories of individuals who personally experienced an emotionally charged, public event: The linguistic conflict at the University of Leuven\(^1\) at the end of the 1960s, in which, due to pressure from the Dutch-speakers, the French-speakers had to leave the university and relocate to Wallonia (the South of Belgium). Before moving on to the details of the study, we will first provide a brief history of the events leading up to the separation of the university (for a more detailed overview, see Jonckheere, 1979; Laporte, 1999).

1. A concise historical overview

The University of Leuven was founded in the 15th century. At its inception, all academic classes were taught in Latin. However, this all changed in 1834 when the university shifted from Latin to French. During this time, French was the language of the upper social class throughout the country and considered the language of the elites. The Belgian working class, alternatively, spoke Dutch (more specifically, Flemish, a dialect of Dutch) in the North and Wallon (a set of dialects close to French) in the South of Belgium. Dutch was not spoken at the university until 1930, at which point the university officially became bilingual and remained so until the separation in the 1960s.

During the 1960s, the entire university administration remained localized in Leuven, a city located in the Dutch-speaking area, but every department, as well as the central administration, was divided: one conducting business in French, the other in Dutch. But, in the fall of 1964, over-population worsened. The administrators started to envision an extension of the university in the French-speaking region (Wallonia), near the linguistic border. The Dutch-speaking students strongly supported this proposition. In 1965, the French-speaking students organized a march in Houthulst to protest against the decision. The university administration agreed and moved the university to Louvain-la-Neuve in 1972. Eight years later, in 1979, the transfer was complete. For more information about the historical context see Klein, Licata, Van der Linden, Mercy, & Lumint, 2012; Jonckheere, 1979; Laporte, 1999; Lumint et al., 2012; Taminiaux, 1966).

Thus, here we have a conflict in which one group was clearly politically involved in an attempt to implement an agenda and won (the “winners”: the Dutch-speakers) and another group who wished to maintain the status quo but lost (the “losers”: the French-speakers). However, the outcome of this conflict remains culturally and historically important for both social groups. For this reason, we were interested in whether this conflict led to differences across social groups in terms of the formation of elaborate memories and subsequent rehearsals. Furthermore, we wanted to examine

\(^{1}\) Leuven is the Dutch name of the city in Flanders, and Louvain is its name in French. In this paper, we will refer to the city in Flanders as Leuven, to the university in Flanders as the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, to the city in Wallonia as Louvain-la-Neuve, and to the university in Wallonia as the Université catholique de Louvain.
whether the initiating conditions [rehearsal (Bernsten & Thomsen, 2005; Breslin & Safer, 2011; Hirst et al., 2009; Luminit & Curci, 2009; Talarico & Moore, 2012), personal/political involvement (Conway et al., 1994)] emotional appraisals (positive or negative) (Bohn & Bernsten, 2007; Breslin & Safer, 2011; Kensinger & Schacter, 2006; Luminit & Curci, 2008; Talarico & Moore, 2012), and importance (Bohn & Bernsten, 2007)] often found to initiate detailed FBMs would similarly be associated with the formation of elaborate event memories of the conflict itself (Bernsten, 2009; Breslin & Safer, 2011; Kensinger & Schacter, 2006; Talarico & Moore, 2012).

In line with Bernsten’s approach inspired by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we expected Dutch-speakers to rate the events surrounding the conflict as more positive and, therefore, have more elaborate memories (Breslin & Safer, 2011; Talarico & Moore, 2012). We also expected them to rehearse the events more often (Breslin & Safer, 2011; Talarico & Moore, 2012), to be more personally/politically involved, and, therefore, rate the events as more important (Conway et al., 1994). In turn, we expected the French-speakers to rate the events as more negative.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 124 former students (53 French-speaking, 71 Dutch-speaking) at the University of Leuven. Only participants who studied at the University of Leuven during the conflict (graduating year between 1964 and 1970) were allowed to participate. Participants ranged in age from 59 to 71 years ($M = 63.39, SD = 2.51$). Our participants consisted of 96 men and 28 women. Eighty-eight participants were retired, 28 were still active professionally, and 8 did not provide this information.

Participants were recruited via the UCL (Université catholique de Louvain; French-speaking)/KUL (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven; Dutch-speaking) alumni associations. Additionally, French-speaking participants were recruited via the Belgian Federation of Civil Engineers’ yearbook, and the alumni association for medical students of the Université catholique de Louvain. Likewise, Dutch-speaking participants were also recruited through an announcement published on the website and newsletter of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven Alumni association. Participants were invited to send us an e-mail if willing to participate.

2.2. Procedure

The questionnaires$^2$ were sent by post with a stamped return envelope. Unlike previous FBM and event memory research, it was impossible to isolate one central event during the conflict, as it lasted several months. Therefore, in order to examine the most meaningful moments of the conflict, according to each individual across social groups, we designed the questionnaire such that participants could first write down the event they believed to be the most important and to describe it in a few words. If they were unable to elicit their own event, they were instructed to pick one from a pre-tested list$^1$. The list included the following events: Folk university of Hout-Si-Plou; the bishops support of a united university; the radical change of position of Bishop Desmedt, who approved the separation; and the fall of the Vanden Boeynants government (for more information about these events, see Laporte, 1999). Of all the participants, 56.3% volunteered a public event. The remaining 43.7% picked one event from the list provided. Of those participants who volunteered a public event, 61.4% were Dutch-speakers (see Table 1 for a list of all the events elicited).

Second, the extent to which participants forged elaborate memories of the event was evaluated with one open-ended item. We asked participants the following: “Try to remember as many details as possible associated with the event you provided or chose from the provided list. For every detail you remember, please write down a key word to represent each detail recalled. Please do not repeat any information already provided in the questionnaire.”

Third, participants were asked to rate the importance of the event: “When the event occurred, to what extent was it important to you and your life?” (1 = not at all important, 7 = extremely important). Here and elsewhere, we divided the Likert-scale scores by seven to create a “modified score” ranging from 0 to 1. This procedure allowed us to compare the rating scores with the nominal scores we collected in other assessments.

Fourth, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt negative and positive emotions at the time of the event. Negative and positive emotions were assessed via six items: “When you think back about when the event occurred, did you feel (1) sad/(2) angry/(3) frightened/(4) anxious/(5) disgusted/(6) happy” (1 = not at all; 7 = extremely). In order to assess negative emotions, we calculated the average of the modified scores of the first five items. Internal consistency was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$). Positive emotions were assessed with the last emotion question, “Happy.” Again, we used a modified version of the score, which ranged from 0 to 1.

Fifth, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they rehearsed the event using a series of three items, each assessing one

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$^1$ We pre-tested a list of 12 events ($n=8$). We asked our participants to evaluate the extent to which they could clearly imagine the presented events when asked to think about them. Scores were based on a seven-point Likert-scale (from “very blurry” to “very clear”). We selected the four events with the highest mean scores.

$^2$ In our original questionnaire, we included a number of questions for which we do not disclose or analyze in the present paper due either to their lack of relevance to and/or appropriateness for our current paper. For example, we included a list of questions similar to which have been used to assess FBMs in prior research (e.g., What was the weather like? What day of the week did it occur? etc.). We initially used these questions as a measure of elaborate memories to emulate previous FBM research. However, we ultimately settled on the number of details recalled as the most appropriate means by which to measure elaborate memories for an experienced event. We also included questions about confidence, clarity, etc. However, they were not the focus of this particular paper and, therefore, were left out of our manuscript to clarify and streamline our manuscript and analyses. For a complete list of all questions listed in our questionnaire, please contact our first author.

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dutch-speakers</th>
<th>French-speakers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dutch-speakers march</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French-speakers march</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undetermined actors march</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brawls between French- and Dutch-speakers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strike</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relocation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision from the university authorities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal event$^a$</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events related to the bishops</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting a united university</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events related to Folk university of Hout-Si-Plou</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events related to the fall of the Vanden Boeynants government</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^a$ These are events that happened during the crisis and were relevant to the Leuven crisis, but were completely unrelated to categories created for the survey (e.g., hout-si-plou, strike, etc.).
Table 2
Mean comparisons across social groups: memory elaborations, rehearsal types (media, conversational, rumination), importance, personal/political involvement, negative emotions, and positive emotion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales</th>
<th>French-speaking</th>
<th>Dutch-speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory elaboration</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media rehearsal</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational rehearsal</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruminational rehearsal</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/political involvement</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SD = standard deviations.
' Significant at the .05 level.
" Significant at the .01 level.

3. Results

Across both social groups, no participant recalled more than ten details. In what follows, we first examined the mean differences across social groups for memory elaborations, rehearsal types, importance, personal/political involvement, negative emotions, and positive emotions. We then conducted, for each social group, correlation and partial correlation analyses, focusing on memory elaborations and rehearsal types. We also compared identical, significant correlations significant across social groups.

3.1. Mean comparisons

3.1.1. Memory elaborations and rehearsal types

The Dutch-speakers exhibited more elaborate memories of the events surrounding the Leuven/Louvain conflict than the French-speakers, t(122) = 2.51, p < .01. Furthermore, Dutch-speakers also rehearsed (media, conversations, and ruminations) these events more often than the French-speakers, for all three types of rehearsal (media: t(118) = 4.57, d = 0.80, p < .001; conversations: t(118) = 2.67, d = 0.49, p = .01; ruminations: t(120) = 3.70, d = 0.68, p < .001) [see Table 2 for means and standard deviations].

3.1.2. Initiating conditions

The Dutch-speakers were more personally/politically involved with the events and associated the events with more positive emotions than did the French-speakers, t(106) = 2.80, d = 0.55, p = .01, and t(101) = 4.69, d = 0.94, p < .001, respectively. In line with these results, the French-speakers rated these events as more negative, t(96) = 4.75, d = 0.94, p < .001. Despite these differences, both social groups rated the events surrounding the Leuven/Louvain conflict as equally (statistically) important, t(118) = 1.69, p = .10 (again see Table 2).

3.2. Correlations

To examine the relation between the rehearsal types and memory elaborations in terms of initiating conditions across social groups, we conducted a series of Pearson correlation analyses (see Table 3).

3.2.1. Rehearsal types

For the French-speakers, all rehearsal types (media, conversational, and rumination) were positively associated with importance, personal/political involvement, and negative emotions. No rehearsal type was associated with positive emotions. For the Dutch-speakers, all rehearsal types were positively associated with importance. However, only conversational and ruminational rehearsal were positively associated with personal/political involvement. Media rehearsal was not associated with personal/political involvement for the Dutch-speakers. Negative emotions were positively associated with media and ruminational rehearsals for the Dutch-speakers, but, unlike the findings for the French-speakers, conversational rehearsal was not. This suggests that even for those Dutch-speakers who rated the events negatively, this negative appraisal did not influence the extent to which they talked about it with others. As with the French-speakers, no rehearsal types were associated with positive emotions (again, see Table 3).

3.2.2. Memory elaborations

For the French-speakers, we found conversational and ruminational rehearsal types, personal/political involvement and positive emotions to all be positively associated with memory elaborations. Alternatively, importance was not significantly associated with memory elaborations. For the Dutch-speakers, we again found positive associations between memory elaboration and conversational and ruminational rehearsal types, personal/political involvement and positive emotions. However, unlike for the French-speakers, importance was significantly associated with memory elaborations for the Dutch-speakers. For both the French and Dutch speakers, media rehearsal and negative emotions were not significantly correlated with memory elaboration (again, see Table 3).

We followed up these analyses with partial correlations, as our sample size was too small for multiple correlations, controlling for each of the initiating conditions across social group. In an effort to streamline the results, we will focus only on the most relevant findings, in particular, intensity of positive emotions. On the one hand, when we control for intensity of positive emotions, we found that all three of the other significant initiating conditions (conversational rehearsal, ruminational rehearsal, and personal/political involvement) remain significantly associated with memory elaborations for French-speakers (see Table 3). On the other hand, for the Dutch-speakers, the previous significance of all the correlations disappeared when controlling for intensity of positive emotions. However, the correlation between memory elaborations and negative emotions becomes significant when controlling for intensity of positive emotions for the Dutch-speakers. Conversely, when we control for each of the other initiating conditions, one at a time, the correlation between memory elaborations and negative emotions becomes significant for the Dutch-speakers.

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4 In earlier analyses, we made a distinction between those who volunteered their own public event and those who chose from the list provided. In an effort to streamline our results, we do not provide these analyses. For the interested reader, the first author may be contacted for these results.
positive emotions remained positively associated with memory elaborations for both French-speakers and Dutch-speakers. Thus, these results suggest that, for the Dutch speakers, rehearsal may not contribute to the elaborateness of their memories. Even for the French-speakers, event valence may be the most critical variable in predicting elaborateness, not rehearsal itself. Positively valenced events are more elaborately remembered than negative ones.

In comparing significant bivariate correlations across social groups, we found significant differences across social groups for negative emotions/media rehearsal and negative emotions/rumination rehearsal, $Z = 1.94, p =.05$ and $Z = 2.76, p = .01$, respectively. Specifically, the associations between negative emotions/media rehearsal and negative emotions/rumination rehearsal are significantly stronger for the French-speakers than for the Dutch-speakers.

### 4. Discussion

The goal of the present research was to understand what factors affect the extent to which individuals forge elaborate memories of directly experienced, politically and emotionally charged events. We specifically examined 5 factors: (1) social group identification (French-/Dutch-speakers), (2) emotional appraisals (positive/negative), (3) rehearsal (media, conversational, rumination), (4) personal/political involvement and (5) importance. In particular, we were interested in whether the role social group identity plays in creating elaborate memories is mediated by emotional appraisal (in particular, positive emotions) and different types of rehearsal. Three over-arching claims can be derived from our results: (1) in line with Berntsen’s social identity approach to FBMs, social group membership matters for directly experienced, politically and emotionally charged events as well; (2) emotionally appraising past conflicts positively is not associated with an increase in rehearsals, but is associated with more elaborate memories and may be a determining factor in the formation of elaborate memories, especially for the Dutch-speakers; and (3) appraising past conflicts negatively is associated with more rehearsals, especially for the French-speakers.

We will consider all three in turn. First, our results support and extend prior research examining how social group membership influences the way individuals remember public events (Breslin & Safer, 2011; Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Kensinger & Schacter, 2006; Talarico & Moore, 2012). Most notably, Dutch-speakers, the “winners” of the conflict, exhibited more detailed memory elaborations and rehearsed the events more often, a finding consistent with the pleasantness bias literature (Bohn & Berntsen, 2007). Furthermore, unlike for the French-speakers, the more important Dutch-speakers rated the events, the more elaborate were their memories. These results also support the results of Talarico and Moore (2012) and Breslin and Safer (2011) who found that fans of the winning team had more accurate and elaborate memories. Our results, however, do not support the findings of Kensinger and Schacter (2006) who found no difference in terms of elaborate memories across opposing fans. Thus, what is becoming clearer is a need to better understand why the results of Kensinger and Schacter deviate from what is becoming a seemingly robust finding, that is, the winning (positive) social group in either sporting matches or political conflicts exhibit more elaborate memories (Breslin & Safer, 2011; Talarico & Moore, 2012).

Despite these differences, some similarities transcended social group membership. For example, both social groups rated the events as equally important. More critically, we found that being more personally/politically involved led to more detailed memory elaborations, regardless of social group membership (see also Berntsen & Thomsen, 2005; Conway et al., 1994). Work by Berntsen and Thomsen (2005) has underlined the impact of personal/political involvement and self-relevance on the formation of elaborate autobiographical memories. Their study examined the

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**Table 3**

Pearson correlations (and partial correlations where relevant) according to social group: Memory elaborations and rehearsal types (media, conversational, rumination) by social involvement, personal/political involvement, negative emotions, and positive emotions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Memory elaborations</th>
<th>Media rehearsal</th>
<th>Conversational rehearsal</th>
<th>Rummnation rehearsal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>French-speakers</td>
<td>Dutch-speakers</td>
<td>French-speakers</td>
<td>Dutch-speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media rehearsal</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.42$^{*}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>.38$^{*}$</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.42$^{*}$</td>
<td>.46$^{*}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rummination</td>
<td>.34$^{*}$</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.58$^{*}$</td>
<td>.41$^{*}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.50$^{*}$</td>
<td>.42$^{*}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/political</td>
<td>.31$^{*}$</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.37$^{*}$</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.53$^{*}$</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.63$^{*}$</td>
<td>.32$^{*}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions</td>
<td>.43$^{*}$</td>
<td>.48$^{*}$</td>
<td>.21$^{*}$</td>
<td>.12$^{*}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Partial correlations: PE = controlling for positive emotion; MR = controlling for media rehearsal; CR = controlling for conversational rehearsal; RR = controlling for rumination rehearsal; IM = controlling for importance; PP = controlling for personal/political involvement; NE = controlling for negative emotions.

$^{*}$ Significant at the .05 level.

$^{*}$ Significant at the .01 level.
memories of WWII in Danes and found that the more involved individuals were with the Resistance, the more vivid and detailed their memories were of the announcement of the German occupation and Liberation.

Second, and in line with our first point, positively appraising the events of the conflict (or appraising the events as less negative as the case may be for the French-speakers) was associated with increased memory elaborations. This variable did not, however, correlate with rehearsal type. Critically, the association between positive appraisal and elaboration was not limited to the Dutch-speakers (the “winners”) but held for the French-speakers (the “losers”) as well. Furthermore, positive emotion is the only initiating condition that remained significantly correlated with elaborateness when controlling for all other variables, for both French- and Dutch-speakers. This suggests that, unlike previous research (Breslin & Safer, 2011), rehearsal may not be the sole factor in determining elaborateness of a memory. Rehearsal may reinforce a memory, but it does not necessarily lead one to form a more elaborate representation. These results partially support the work by Talarico and Moore (2012) who found that rehearsals did not fully mediate the association between positive emotions and accurate/elaborate memories.

Lastly, for both French- and Dutch-speaking individuals, appraising the events surrounding the Leuven/Louvain conflict as negative was generally associated with increases in rehearsal (see Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1998). Perhaps more interesting though, is that, not only did the French-speakers exhibit a significant association between negative emotions and conversational rehearsal (no such association with Dutch-speakers), but that the association between negative emotions and media and rumination rehearsal were significantly stronger than that for the Dutch-speakers. That is, at least for the French-speakers, the more an event is appraised negatively, the more likely people will dwell on it. Moreover, when we controlled for positive emotions, the association between elaborate memories and negative emotions for the Dutch-speakers became significant. That is, the more Dutch-speakers appraised the event negatively (when controlling for positive emotions), the more elaborate their memories became. This may be because appraising it negatively made the event more distinct in that such appraisals ran counter to the general collective mood (i.e., positive) and, therefore, became more emotionally arousing, and, as a consequence, led to a more elaborate memory of the event (McGaugh, 2003, 2006). Future research, however, is needed to better understand this result.

One drawback of our study's methodology is our reliance on the participants' self-reports as a measure of elaborate memories. We asked participants to recollect an event as a list of details by writing down a key word for each detail rather than collecting a narrative and then dividing the narrative into idea units. We did, however, provide participants lucid examples of what constituted a detail. Although we do not expect that the French- and Dutch-speakers interpreted our instructions differently, follow-up studies should examine whether converging evidence occurs when using different methods for collecting recollections. Additionally, due to the idiosyncrasies of the participants’ memories, we were unable to examine the accuracy of their recollections. Future research may examine to what extent there is an association between how elaborate a memory is and its accuracy for those involved in an emotionally charged, directly experienced, public event (see Talarico & Moore, 2012).

In sum, the present results extend prior research examining both public events and FBMs to public, directly experienced emotionally charged events. The initiating conditions that help forge detailed FBMs also help shape the extent to which individuals from opposing social groups forge detailed, elaborate memories of a public, politically charged event. Our results suggest that social group membership may simply potentiate people to remember the events of a particular conflict in a certain way, but that what ultimately matters, to a certain extent, is the social/cognitive processing individuals undertake in understanding how they came to remember the past. Our results indicate that the extent to which individuals appraise the event as positive is one such critical cognitive process.

4.1. Practical application

Further research is necessary, but our study is the first to extend this type of research from sporting events to a real, historical conflict, which, to this day, continues to shape Belgium's history and identity. It is through this and similar studies in the future that researchers will be better able to understand the similar and different social/cognitive processes undertaken by individuals from opposing social groups when remembering a shared event and, by doing so, better understand the factors involved when these memories diverge over time.

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