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RUNNING HEAD: Comments on Paez et al. (2008)

Historical experiences, collective memory and willingness to fight for one's country:

Comments on Paez et al. (2008)

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Abstract

This paper considers Paez et al.'s (2008) article '"Remembering" World War II and willingness to fight: Sociocultural factors in the social representation of historical warfare across 22 societies.' Despite the importance of their focus on social representations of history and willingness to fight for one's country, it is argued that Paez et al.'s paper features a number of methodological flaws. Specifically, the way in which key variables (historical experience, collective memory and willingness to fight for one's country) are operationalized is especially problematic. The implications of these weaknesses for their conceptual conclusions are discussed briefly, as are the more general limitations of statistical analyses of survey data for addressing these issues.

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Comments on Paez et al. (2008)

Paez et al. (2008) address a topic of great importance – and one that has received
increasing attention in recent years (e.g. Liu et al., 2005; Liu & Hilton, 2005;
Pennebaker et al., 2006) – the social representation of history. Specifically, they are
concerned with the social representation of historical warfare, and they present
analyses of a wealth of cross-cultural data on collective memory, social
representations of history and willingness to fight for one's country.

There is insufficient space in this short commentary to do justice to the
important work that these authors are doing in directing our attention to the centrality
of social representations of historical warfare in shaping contemporary understandings
and behaviours. Suffice to say, we are in agreement with them that social and cross-
cultural psychologists should pay more attention to such issues. In addition, it is
relatively rare to see the willingness of individuals to fight for their countries treated
as an object of social scientific concern. All too often social scientists treat the
association between 'patriotic' sentiment and warfare in general (and military service
in particular) as a given, rather than as a matter for empirical analysis (Gibson &
Abell, 2004). That Paez et al. attempt to incorporate these issues into their analysis,
rather than simply taking them for granted, is an undoubted strength of their paper.

However, there are other elements of Paez et al.'s paper which we find more
troublesome. Our comments are primarily methodological, although these are (as
ever) difficult to separate from conceptual issues. Specifically, our commentary will
focus on some of the key measures used by Paez et al. – those of historical
experiences in WWII, collective memory, and willingness to fight for one's country.

Historical experiences of World War II

Paez et al. (2008) cite the estimated World War II death tolls as having been derived from Wikipedia, but the precise page(s), and date(s) of access are not provided. These details are crucial as a brief inspection of Wikipedia entries on WWII points to a variety of different possible sources, many of which give different estimates for the death tolls of the combatant states. For example, the entry 'World War II casualties' (2008), current at the time of writing (August 2008), lists the total WWII deaths for China as 20,000,000. However, a cursory browse through past versions of the entry reveal that this figure was, for example, listed as 10,000,000 on 9th November 2006 (World War II casualties, 2006). Clearly, the precise death tolls for any particular combatant state are a matter of historical debate (see e.g. Ellman & Maksudov, 1994; Harrison, 2003; Haynes, 2003a, b, in relation to the Soviet Union), something which is acknowledged on Wikipedia itself (World War II casualties, 2008), and Paez et al. are of course careful to point out that they are using 'estimated' totals. But the key point here is that Wikipedia, by virtue of its reliance on non-expert user-generated content, is both transient and unreliable as an academic source. Where the use of Wikipedia is unavoidable (e.g. when researching the representation of particular topics in Wikipedia), careful citation is required. The archiving system employed by Wikipedia means that most previous versions of entries are available to view, but there are so many different variations that it is imperative that researchers make it clear which version they have used (i.e. by providing a precise URL and date of access, as recommended by most citation guides, e.g. American Psychological Association, 2007; British Psychological Society, 2004).

Although some glosses on evidence comparing error rates on Wikipedia with other, more traditional, reference works have been relatively favourable towards Wikipedia (e.g. Giles, 2005[1]), the very nature of Wikipedia's collaborative approach to knowledge is its greatest weakness for academic purposes, meaning that caution must be exercised in using it as a source. This is, perhaps, no different from the caution one would exercise when consulting more traditional sources, but at the very least, it is essential that, as far is possible, citations allow readers to access the precise version(s) consulted.

Another key 'historical experience' variable incorporated into Paez et al.'s analysis is whether combatant states were victorious or defeated in WWII, or whether they were neutral. In so far as the scoring system used for this variable involved the placing of countries with quite different historical experiences into the same category (e.g. neutral countries and 'passive allies'), the extent to which this captures 'historical experience' in any meaningful sense is questionable.[2]

Collective memory

Paez et al. assess 'remembering', and evaluation, of historical events through a single item: 'Imagine that you were given [sic[3]] a seminar in world history. What seven events would you teach as the most important in world history? How positively or negatively do you regard each event?' (p. 376). This question seems to be problematic insofar as it actually assesses the *importance* attached to historical events.

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[1] It is worth noting, however, that in the study reported by Giles (2005, p. 901), the number of 'factual errors, omissions or misleading statements' in Wikipedia (162) was over 30% greater than in Encyclopaedia Britannica (123).

[2] In addition, this variable, despite being at a nominal level of measurement, is used in the correlation analyses reported in the results section.

[3] This appears to be a simple typographical error in Paez et al.'s paper, rather than an error in the question itself. In other papers reporting related research, the word 'given' is replaced by the grammatically correct 'giving' (e.g. Liu et al., 2005).

There may be good reasons for assuming that, culturally, those events which feature most prominently in the collective memory will be those to which the most 'importance' is ascribed (although no justification for this is provided), and Paez et al. do introduce this measure by referring to it as '*Percentage remembering WWI and WWII as important historical events*' (p. 376, italics in original). However, subsequent glosses of the measure strip it of even these nuances, referring simply to 'recall' (p. 377; p. 378). The issue of how being asked to list 'important' events might affect 'recall' of these events is left unexplored, though we might (if we put aside our concerns about the use of this variable in the correlational analysis) surmise that it may account for the significant correlation reported between 'being a victorious nation … [and] greater WWII recall' (p. 377). Thus our interpretation of this finding might refer to victorious nations placing greater *importance* on WWII as a historical event, rather than simply reflecting its status as a collective memory which can be more easily 'recalled'.

Moreover, the extent to which the evaluative stances taken towards historical events and processes can be reduced to judgements on a single positive-negative dimension is debateable. Of course, the use of such measures is widespread in psychological research, but there is now a well-established critique of this type of survey methodology which should serve to draw attention to its limitation for use in assessing the representation of complex historical processes. For example, Condor and Abell (2006) found not only different *evaluations* of the British Empire amongst their semi-structured interview respondents in Scotland and England, but at times found that it was actually *constructed* differently by respondents in the two countries. As discourse analysts have pointed out (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987), once we confront the accounts of social actors in their own words, it often becomes apparent

that attitude objects (e.g. World War II; the British Empire) are difficult to separate from evaluations (e.g. positive-negative). This is hinted at in passing when Paez et al. explain that '[i]n some countries, WWII was mentioned by synonyms such as the Patriotic War in Russia' (2008, p. 376). The term 'Patriotic War' itself comes with an in-built evaluation (compare the hypothetical alternative 'Nationalistic War'; and see Billig, 1995, on the ideological functions of the terms 'patriotism' and 'nationalism').

Willingness to fight for one's country

Despite the authors' commendable efforts to explore this variable, the way in which it is operationalized can be seen as problematic in several respects. 'Willingness to fight for country' is measured using a single yes/no item: 'Of course, we all hope that there will not be another war, but if it were to come to that, would you be willing to fight for your country?' (p. 377). The first point worthy of note about this item is that it is a leading question – containing as it does a clearly evaluative component ('we all hope that…') which in its very asking conveys a normative expectation of the adoption of an anti-war attitudinal stance as a default position. It might be argued that this represents a form of wording designed to guard against socially desirable responding given that 'fighting' is generally subject to opprobrium, but this would be to treat the status of 'fighting' as culturally invariable. In contrast, it may be that, in some cultural contexts, it would be socially normative to respond that one would indeed be willing to fight for one's country. Given that Paez et al. are sensitive to the possibility that cultures may differ in terms of power distance values, 'culture of peace', and so on (see p. 375), it is perhaps surprising that these issues were neglected with respect to this measure.

Furthermore, the question (and more generally the methodology of collecting responses to forced choice questionnaire items) neglects the important issue of the cultural meaning of terms such as 'country'. The issue of what, precisely, one is willing to fight *for* when one declares a willingness to fight for one's country, is far from straightforward. Despite a tendency in much of the social psychological literature to assume that people within a nation understand terms such as 'country' and 'nation' in a straightforward and unitary manner, recent evidence suggests that these, and related terms, may in fact be polyvalent. For example, Condor (2006, p. 676) noted that in semi-structured interview accounts collected in England, nationhood 'tended to be formulated either as an entirely de-populated construct (e.g. a place or set of institutions) or … as a hybrid collectivity of social and natural elements, of people, places and things.' In the context of discussions of military service, also in England, Gibson and Condor (in press) found that the term 'country' in phrases such as 'fighting for the country' or 'serving the country' was sometimes oriented to as indicating a national people or territory, but that there were also occasions on which people treated a willingness to fight for one's country as synonymous with support for the policy of one's government. Although these findings, unlike those of Paez et al., come from samples drawn from only one (national) cultural context, they nevertheless indicate the potential for 'country' to be treated in potentially quite radically different ways. By simply asking people about their willingness to fight for their 'country', then, we may miss the crucial issue of how the term 'country' is received. This is not to suggest that people simply misunderstood the question, or were not sure what meaning of 'country' was implied by the question, but that the precise meaning of country (people, territory, institution,

or any combination of these) might be better treated as a matter for participants themselves, rather than being assumed *a priori*.

Concluding remarks

Paez et al. (2008, p. 378) conclude by suggesting that 'it is event-specific and focused symbolic learning, passed by word of mouth and mass media and replayed through institutional forms of commemoration and state building, that contributes to a culture of war, not a general abstract dimension of hawkish remembrance.' Precisely how these conclusions follow from the results reported is unclear. It is worth bearing in mind that Paez et al. operationalize the 'general abstract dimension of hawkish remembrance' in terms of the 'recall' of World War I, which here stands for 'wars in general' (p. 378). However, rather than treating WWI as an index of 'wars in general', we might instead suggest that its very specificity may be able to account for the absence of a correlation with willingness to fight for one's country and the various measures of cultural values employed by Paez et al. If, as Paez et al. (p.374) point out, WWII tends to be represented as a 'Just War' in victorious nations, then the position of WWI may be much more ambiguous (see e.g. Paris, 2000). In short, the use of any single war to stand for 'wars in general', and thereby to treat 'recall' of that war as indicative of a 'general abstract dimension of hawkish remembrance', is problematic. It is therefore difficult to see how the correlations between willingness to fight, cultural values and WWII – but not WWI – 'recall' lead to these conclusions.

Moreover, no evidence is presented for the importance of cultural transmission through 'word of mouth and mass media', nor 'through institutional forms of commemoration and state building'. Of course, these factors are undoubtedly significant, but the implication created of national populations passively accepting the

cultural messages relayed through these channels implies a vision of social actors as cultural dupes, unable to argue, debate, and discuss the significance and meaning of key historical events (cf. Billig, 1987). Moreover, by virtue of the statistical techniques employed, culture is reduced to a mean response which is then implicitly generalised to *entire* national populations, which in effect glosses over the possibility of cultural variation *within* these populations. This points to a further problem: the tendency to elide the constructs of *society*, *culture*, *nation* and *state* (Billig, 1995). It is beyond the scope of the present commentary to explore these issues in any depth, but, to conclude, it should be incumbent on researchers to be cognizant of such matters. Moreover, for all that Paez et al. should be commended for attempting to grapple with these important phenomena, the complex interplay of culture, history and social representations surely requires a more subtle set of methodological tools than those utilized in their paper.

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