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Values in peace psychology: The example of empirical research on Holocaust remembrance

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Values in Peace Psychology: The Example of Empirical Research on Holocaust Remembrance*

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*This is a translation of the originally German article "Werte in der Friedenspsychologie. Am Beispiel empirischer Forschung zu Holocaust-Erinnerung", published in *Wissenschaft und Frieden*, 42(2024/4).

Research Area

Dynamics of Political Systems

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Values in Peace Psychology: The Example of Empirical Research on Holocaust Remembrance*

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Introduction

How do Holocaust remembrance projects affect participants? This is the topic of our research. We mainly conduct quantitative, empirical studies and use this method to understand the causal impact of projects. In doing so, we are often confronted with questions of normativity and come up against the limits of the ideal of objective (as in, value-free) research. This poses a particular challenge for empirical peace psychologists. However, normative judgments must be made transparent and discussed openly.

It is obvious: our research on the impact of Holocaust remembrance projects is value-driven. But isn't that a contradiction to the ideal of objective research? Values influenced, for example, our choice of research topic, the selection of dependent variables, and the interpretation of the results. These decisions are often difficult and require intensive engagement with normative judgments and a commitment to one's own values. It becomes clear that this entails a responsibility that, in our opinion, goes beyond that of a private individual. It also becomes clear that, given our topic, it is virtually impossible to conduct good empirical research without dealing intensively with normative questions. That is why we want our contribution to motivate other peace psychologists to make their normative decisions transparent and discuss them openly. First, of course, the question arises as to why one should even conduct empirical research on a topic that is so value-based. What can peace psychology contribute here? What can a quantitative empirical study on this topic look like?

Empirical research into remembrance projects

Although collective memory is a social and cultural phenomenon that is often studied by the humanities, peace psychology also plays an important role in research. This is because history only becomes memory when people engage with it (Hirst and Manier, 2008) – and psychological factors play a decisive role here. This engagement can take many different forms, from simply absorbing historical facts to actively participating in educational or

remembrance projects. Since the Holocaust is a deeply traumatic and difficult topic in history, it is by no means a given that people will engage with it (Bilewicz et al., 2017).

According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), it is particularly difficult for people who identify with the historical perpetrators to learn *about* the past and to learn *from* the past, as this calls into question the morality of their group. Because groups are an important source of self-esteem, the theory argues, such information tends to be rejected. At the same time, many social actors hope that we can learn from the past and consciously confront our histories of violence. This hope is complex: on the one hand, it often involves preventing violence against former victim groups in the future. This process is also often of particular importance to the descendants of victim groups (Shnabel et al., 2009), for whom keeping memories alive can be a form of symbolic justice. It is therefore important to understand which remembrance projects deal constructively with repression and thus have the desired effect of learning from the past. Since the empirical data on these questions is extremely mixed, we conducted two larger projects, each dealing with prominent and innovative projects from German remembrance culture.

Stolpersteine

Stolpersteine ("stumbling stones") are perhaps the best-known project commemorating the victims of Nazi persecution. These small copper cobblestones can now be found throughout Europe. In Berlin alone, there are over 8,000. The stones honor the victims at their last chosen place of residence. They are usually commissioned by family members and made by an artist, Gunter Demnig. For some time now, there has been a map showing the location of all the *Stolpersteine* in Berlin. We used this map to investigate whether there is a correlation between the presence and number of *Stolpersteine* in a voting district and the vote share of the far-right party AfD. We found a correlation in a longitudinal study covering seven elections (from 2013 to 2017) in all Berlin districts. Where new *Stolpersteine* were laid, the AfD performed worse on average in the following elections. The study was published in

PNAS (Turkoglu et al., 2023).

Since we only used existing quantitative data and did not collect any data ourselves, we were unable to investigate why *Stolpersteine* reduce the AfD’s vote share in our study. We suspect that they make the past visible and, due to their local character and the activities of fellow citizens who, for example, clean the *Stolpersteine*, make it difficult to ignore. As a result, they stand in stark contrast to the rhetoric of the AfD, which repeatedly attempts to downplay the atrocities committed by Germans during the Holocaust (Keim, 2021). From this research, we learn that even a project that primarily serves the purpose of remembrance can have an impact on current political action by undermining support for an anti-democratic party.

#everynamecounts

How does participation in a participatory remembrance project affect those involved? We addressed this question in a second research project conducted in collaboration with the Arolsen Archives. The Arolsen Archives are the world’s largest archive on victims and survivors of the Nazi regime. After the end of the war, the Allies established the archive and transferred all original documents from concentration camps, as well as documents on forced labor and from displaced persons’ camps, to the Arolsen Archives. The documents were used to search for missing persons and now enable relatives to learn more about the fate of their ancestors. Since 2020, the Arolsen Archives have been inviting volunteers to help digitize the archive. More than 7 million of the archive’s total of over 30 million documents have already been digitized by over 115,000 volunteers. ¹

We conducted two randomized studies to investigate the impact of participating in #everynamecounts. A total of 1,452 participants were divided into two groups. One group contributed to #everynamecounts, while the other group served as a control group and was

¹With the #everynamecounts project, anyone can contribute in just five minutes via an online platform to making the documents accessible worldwide and thus building a digital memorial for the victims and survivors. You can also participate in the project. The project can be found at: everynamecounts.arolsen-archives.org.

not informed about the participatory project. Participants were compensated for their time and effort and could withdraw from the project at any time (which some did).

The project yielded interesting results: Participation in #everynamecounts motivated participants to engage in further remembrance work (both on the Holocaust and on German colonial history), to take action against antsemitism, and to promote a pluralistic, democratic society. However, participation had no effect on individual prejudices against minority groups or on the motivation to intervene in cases of discrimination in their interpersonal interactions. What explains the positive effect on collective action? The participants in #everynamecounts report that they are able to make a concrete and important contribution to the common and often abstract goal of collective remembrance ("participatory effectiveness," see also: Van Zomeren et al., 2013). This underscores the importance of #everynamecounts and similar participatory projects—not only as projects in themselves, but also as catalysts for further collective action that constitutes a vibrant culture of remembrance.

Both projects, #everynamecounts and *Stolpersteine*, have an effect that corresponds more to the hope of learning from the past than to the rejection of information. And although the projects are of course only symbolic (they are not reparations payments or legal processes), they can nevertheless change society through their influence on our actions. Without the empirical methods of peace psychology, it would be difficult to generate evidence for this.

Normativity in Research

In implementing both studies, we were confronted at many points with the question of normativity raised by Ulrich Wagner (Wagner, 2023). Wagner explains that peace psychology, as an empirical science, can primarily contribute to the selection of paths, but not to the setting of goals. Goals are the result of moral and ethical considerations or political and democratic decision-making processes, not empirical methods. Nevertheless, peace psychologists should continually address questions of goals, which Wagner sees as a particular

challenge and opportunity for peace psychology.

In our empirical research, we had to make value-based decisions in many areas. We saw this challenge as an opportunity to focus on certain peace psychology goals. In our case, the particular aim is to contribute to a nonviolent and constructive examination of Germany's history of violence through the process and results of our research, with the goal of achieving and maintaining social peace and justice. Using the concrete example of our studies, we want to illustrate where challenges with such decisions may lie and thus show that empirical research into ways forward is virtually impossible without critical reflection and a commitment to specific peace psychology goals in our field.

I. Value decisions in research design

Our research focuses on Holocaust remembrance and education projects. The reason why such projects exist to begin with is normative: the Holocaust is considered a horrific crime, remembrance of the victims and survivors is seen as a moral imperative, and education on the subject is considered necessary in the country where the perpetrators lived—and is promoted accordingly. With a research topic like this, we as researchers cannot be neutral, because that would also be a normative stance on the subject. For example, being neutral on the question of whether commemorating Holocaust victims is desirable is also a normative stance. Any research on this topic is therefore already normatively positioned. If we decide to empirically examine educational and remembrance projects on the Holocaust, this is already a value judgment behind which a normative stance lies. Making these attitudes and value judgments transparent enables other (not only) researchers to understand our research practice and our conclusions.

Secondly, our research deals with special objects. Both stumbling stones and archive documents from concentration camps are not neutral objects (or "stimuli," as they are often called in psychological studies) that can be changed at will in terms of their design, statements, or context (e.g., by presenting documents with or without names). Rather, they

are objects that commemorate specific victims of the Nazi regime or document their fate. As Meron Mendel, historian, educator, and director of the Anne Frank Educational Center, said in an interview with the German Federal Archives: *"These authentic documents or places have something sacred about them, and the responsibility in dealing with them is very high"* (Bundesarchiv, 2021, p. 20).

In order to live up to this responsibility, we therefore decided against altering the objects and presented them to the study participants only in their original context and original version. In the case of *Stolpersteine*, a memorial project, this meant that it was only appropriate for us to use existing data (such as the geolocation of the stones) and to observe the impact of the project indirectly, but not to intervene in any way (such as commissioning *Stolpersteine* specifically for the research project).

In the #everynamecounts study, an educational project, we pointed out to participants that the prisoner registration cards are original documents and asked them to refrain from participating if they did not wish to treat the documents with the respect they deserve. In doing so, we risked losing participants with certain attitudes, which would have affected how we could analyze the data we collected.

We therefore adapted our empirical methods in this and other areas to normative considerations and restricted them in some cases in order to do justice to the special nature of the objects.

II. Research ethics priorities

The subject of our research also has consequences for research ethics (Humphreys, 2015). Remembering the Holocaust is often very important to victims and survivors, as well as their descendants. This remembrance is often linked to specific normative goals, such as ensuring that the victims and their suffering are not forgotten. Even though many survivors and victims are no longer with us, they still feature in our research—their names are inscribed on the *Stolpersteine* ("stumbling stones"), for example, or on concentration camp prisoner

registration cards. Particularly against the backdrop of how German history has been dealt with since at least 1945, in which the ideas and wishes of survivors and family members of victims have been ignored in many places (Czollek, 2023), we believe it would be impossible to conduct ethical research on the Holocaust without attaching great importance to the normative goals of those affected. Since our research, like any kind of empirical research, also carries a risk of harm (e.g., if the research is instrumentalized by the wrong actors and the legacy of the victims is thereby tarnished), we must therefore attach great importance to the goals of the victims who would be affected by such harm, which is ultimately a value judgment.

III. No value-neutral measurement and interpretation

The hypothesis that remembering the Holocaust could motivate citizens to stand up for democracy seems self-evident to us today. However, Katrin Antweiler (2023, ch. 3) convincingly argues that this is by no means a natural connection, but rather the result of a conscious process. The narrative linking the atrocities of the Holocaust to the defense of human rights and liberal democracy was formulated by UNESCO and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), among others, and deliberately embedded in museums, memorials, and educational institutions, thus bringing it into the public consciousness. It was important to us to first understand these global connections before we decided to measure the defense of human rights and democracy, among other things, as dependent variables. Only in this way can we reflect on our interpretations and make transparent how normative assumptions (such as the connection between Holocaust remembrance and the defense of democracy) have informed our measurement methods.

At the same time, when designing our research plan, we took into account two important criticisms of this agenda: First, any psychological research that focuses on the individual and asks what lessons individuals can learn from history for their personal and global responsibility is part of a neoliberal concept of the responsible citizen. This concept emphasizes a

high degree of personal responsibility, which can lead to systemic injustices being overlooked or considered secondary. In the worst case, the focus on individual responsibility ignores the role of ideologies, nation states, and international actors that contributed to the emergence of crimes such as the Holocaust (Antweiler, 2023, ch. 8-9). This is particularly problematic in Germany, where the culture of remembrance is criticized for being primarily symbolic and largely supported by civil society, while the economic and legal consequences for Nazi perpetrators and institutions remain comparatively few (Czollek, 2023, ch. 2). To take this criticism seriously, we measure collective and political action in our studies. Although the focus is on the individual, this is not detached from political structures, but rather in their role as actors in the political system. Interestingly, we find promising results precisely in relation to these collective goals, while no significant effects are evident for individual goals such as reducing prejudice.

The second point of criticism concerns historiography and the creation of public memory. Both are deeply political processes that are closely intertwined with existing power structures (Antweiler, 2023, ch. 8). When we test whether citizens or, worse still, members of certain social groups have internalized these lessons and can therefore be considered "responsible" or still have something to "learn", we are moving into dangerous territory. This can quickly lead to feelings of moral superiority and reduce the space for critical reflection (Antweiler, 2023, ch. 9). In the worst case, our results could be understood as a kind of test: Did the participants pass? Since our results are quite positive, they could contribute to complacency—they "prove" so to speak, that "we Germans are doing everything right". As empirical researchers, we cannot control how our findings are understood and used by various social actors. However, we strive to preempt such one-sided interpretations of our findings by interpreting them against the backdrop of such power-critical perspectives and communicating them in a targeted manner, which is ultimately a value judgment.

Dealing with values in empirical research

It should now be clear how many points in the research process we have dealt with normative judgments. Time and again, we have prioritized social peace and justice in the way we conduct our research (e.g., how we deal with historical objects) and in decisions about what we research (e.g., the research topic "impact of memory projects"). These decisions have strongly influenced our empirical designs. Empirical methods cannot answer normative questions, but values strongly influence which empirical methods we use and how we do so. We therefore consider it all the more important to reflect on these values and discuss them transparently, and hope that there will be plenty of space for this in the peace psychology of the future.

In addition to reflecting on and identifying our value-based decisions throughout the research process, it is essential for us to have a clear commitment to anti-fascism, and against antisemitism, racism, and other forms of group-focused enmity. If we research antisemitism but do not actively contribute to combating it, we become part of the *Versöhnungstheater* ("reconciliation theater")—a term used by Max Czollek to describe German culture of remembrance (Czollek, 2023, ch. 2). A central facet of this *Versöhnungstheater* consists of talking about combating antisemitism and fascism, but primarily focusing on improving the national self-image. The actual fight against the problem takes a back seat to symbolic discourse. Where do we stand as empirical researchers when we write about the problem but do not advocate for structural and societal change? This problem becomes even more acute when we personally benefit from our research, e.g., through publications and promotions.

This highlights the difficulty of separating our lives as researchers of Holocaust remembrance from our lives as private individuals or socially engaged persons (Causadias et al., 2024), as is often demanded by the ideal of objective (value-free) empirical research. Socially engaged individuals influence empirical research through value-based decisions, and successful empirical research morally obliges researchers to become socially engaged. In our opinion, researchers have a responsibility that goes beyond that of private individuals, and a peace

psychology that is normatively committed to the goal of peace through violence reduction opens up a space for this. Furthermore, a democratic, open society is in turn indispensable for science. Only under these circumstances can we continue our research—whether in peace psychology or other fields. Without a democratic and open society, we cannot explore either paths or goals.

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