

# On the causal relationship between participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging

Sabrina de Regt

To cite this article: Sabrina de Regt (2018) On the causal relationship between participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 41:9, 1710-1727, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2017.1302094](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1302094)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1302094>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 27 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1555



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



OPEN ACCESS



# On the causal relationship between participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging

Sabrina de Regt

Department of Sociology, Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

It is often theoretically argued that participation in national commemorations increases feelings of national belonging. Previous studies have also empirically demonstrated that participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging are positively related. We are uncertain, however, about the direction of this relationship. Does participating in national commemorations increase feelings of national belonging (*increase hypothesis*) or do people who attend such ceremonies feel a greater sense of national belonging compared to people who not attend (*selection hypothesis*)? Using an innovative research design, this study sheds more light on the direction of the relationship between participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging. We collected data from respondents before ( $n=469$ ), during ( $n=50$ ) and after ( $n=226$ ) the national ceremony on Remembrance Day in 2015 in the Netherlands. In this study, we found support for the selection hypothesis, but not for the increase hypothesis.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 30 July 2016; Accepted 16 February 2017

**KEYWORDS** National commemorations; feelings of national belonging; participation; self-selection; survey; static group comparison

## Introduction

It is often argued that national commemorations have the power to increase feelings of national belonging (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983; McCrone and McPherson 2009; Smith 2014).<sup>1</sup> Almost every country in the world has such national commemorations (Zerubavel 2003). The question is, however, whether such national ceremonies indeed have the power to increase feelings of national belonging. While previous studies have demonstrated that participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging are positively related (Lubbers and Meuleman 2016; Meuleman and Lubbers

**CONTACT** Sabrina de Regt  [s.deregt@uu.nl](mailto:s.deregt@uu.nl)

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

2013), we cannot automatically conclude that participation in itself increases feelings of national belonging. Issues such as self-selection make it difficult to draw conclusions on whether or not participation in itself is the cause of enhanced feelings of national belonging (Etzioni 2000). Suppose that you interview a person who participated in a national commemorative ceremony and find that he/she feels particularly strongly connected to the nation. One cannot automatically conclude, based on this finding, that participation in national commemorations increases the sense of national attachment, as it is possible that people who feel especially connected to the nation would be more likely to participate in such commemorative rituals (see also Devine-Wright 2001). In this article we provide further evidence on the direction of the link between participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging. We will study whether participation increases feelings of national belonging (*increase hypothesis*) or whether people who feel a strong sense of national belonging are more likely to attend national commemorations (*selection hypothesis*). These hypotheses will be tested using data collected during the national commemoration on Remembrance Day in 2015 in the Netherlands ( $n = 745$ ).

In the Netherlands, every year on 4 May (Remembrance Day) the country commemorates all of the citizens who have died in wars or peacekeeping missions since the outbreak of the Second World War. Support for Remembrance Day is high in the Netherlands and the majority of the population feels that Remembrance Day contributes to Dutch identity (Koenen, Breet, and Verhue 2015). On the day, a remembrance ceremony is held at the National Monument in the national capital, Amsterdam, attended by approximately 20,000 people. The ceremony has several components, based upon which it can be expected that attendance will increase feelings of national belonging. Among other elements, the ceremony reinforces a shared national history and core national values. In addition, national symbols are present in abundance (e.g. the Dutch flag is hung at half-mast and the national anthem is played). As many other countries hold similar ceremonies (Krimp and Reiding 2014), it can be argued that this ceremony in the Netherlands provides a representative case study on the basis of which to determine whether or not participation in national commemorations increases feelings of national belonging.

Coopmans, Lubbers, and Meuleman (2015) have argued that strong research designs are needed in order to draw firm conclusions about the direction of the relationship between participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging. In this study we collected data both *before* the start of the ceremony on Remembrance Day and *after* the ceremony ended. By comparing feelings of attachment in the group before the ceremony started and the group that filled out our questionnaire after the ceremony we were able to study whether or not participation increased feelings of national belonging. In other words, this comparison enabled us to study to what extent

participation in the national commemoration resulted in higher levels of feelings of national belonging (*increase hypothesis*). We also collected data from people who chose not to attend the national commemoration. By comparing feelings of national belonging in this group (the non-attendees) with feelings of national belonging in the group that chose to attend, we were able to determine whether there was a selection effect. Are people who choose to participate in national commemorations more attached to the nation compared to people who choose not to participate (*selection hypothesis*)? It is important to note that while these two hypotheses do compete, they are not incompatible. It is possible that both hypotheses are true: that people with greater feelings of national belonging more often participate in national commemorations and that these feelings of national belonging are even further heightened as a result of attending the national commemoration.

The main advantage of this study is that the research design allowed us to provide additional information on the direction of the relationship between participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging. This study also contributes to existing knowledge on the relationship between national days and national belonging in other ways. For example, one advantage of our approach is that previous studies often adopt a top-down view of rituals – they focus mainly on the intentions of political organizers while neglecting the feelings of the participating population (Fricke 2013). Such official narratives are not necessarily congruent with citizens' experiences (Fox 2006; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). Only by studying the feelings and behaviour of citizens we are able to understand whether participation in national commemorations enhances feelings of national belonging or not (Farquet 2014; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008; Späth 2013). Finally, most empirical studies on the relationship between national commemorations and national belonging employ qualitative research methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews (Fox 2006; Scully 2012; Späth 2013). As Schwartz and Schuman (2005) noted, it is necessary, however, to complement these studies with survey data when aiming to truly understand the link between individual beliefs and commemorations. In summary, by (1) taking aspects such as causality and self-selection into account, (2) studying the attendees of national commemorations rather than focusing on the intentions of policy-makers and (3) using survey data and quantitative research methods we aim to better understand the relationship between participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging.

### **The increase hypothesis: participation in national commemorations enhances feelings of national belonging**

Many authors have argued that national commemoration days increase feelings of national belonging (McCrone and McPherson 2009; Smith 2014). It has

even been argued that such ceremonies are invented in order to create such feelings (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983). There are multiple reasons outlined in the literature to explain why participation in national commemorations has the potential to increase feelings of national belonging.

Firstly, during national commemorations important national symbols are often used extensively. There is wide recognition that the use of national symbols can evoke emotional expressions of national identification (Schatz and Lavine 2007). One important national symbol is the national flag, which makes claims to historic territory, independence and nationhood (Elgenius 2011). It has been demonstrated that exposure to the national flag can significantly increase levels of nationalism (Kemmelmeyer and Winter 2008).<sup>2</sup> It has also been shown that another important national symbol, the national anthem, evokes national associations (Gilboa and Bodner 2009). In general, national symbols have the ability to visualize the nation and remind the people of why they belong together as a nation (Coopmans, Lubbers, and Meuleman 2015).

National commemorative rituals can, furthermore, help to increase national attachment by drawing attention to a shared past. National days often tend to be organized around historical events related to the foundation of the state, such as the signing of a constitution or independence (Elgenius 2011). It is argued that this common history creates a feeling of belonging together as a nation and that by considering its own past, a group becomes conscious of its identity (Halbwachs 1980; Renan 1990). Thus, highlighting significant events in the past during national commemorations creates a feeling of belonging to the nation.

Another reason, mentioned frequently in the literature, concerning the ability of a commemoration to increase national attachment, is the fact that a ritual inculcates the most important norms and values of a given society (Hobsbawn 1983). It is those basic values that attach individual members to the nation state. A famous example in this regard is French rites on Liberty, Equality and Fraternity which remind the citizens of the allegedly unifying fact of French nationhood (Connerton 1989).

Finally, emotions are an important ingredient in a ritual that seeks to produce national identification (Collins 2004; Farquet 2014). Crowds gather during commemorative ceremonies, simultaneously communicating the same thought and participating in the same actions. As a result, such a ceremony creates collective effervescence which excites individuals and subsequently unifies the group (Durkheim 1982). Studies have demonstrated that a high level of emotion experienced as a result of public rituals enhances levels of national identification (Von Scheve et al. 2014).

In summary, based upon the rich research tradition on this topic it can be expected that participating in national commemorations will increase feelings of national belonging.

Hypothesis 1: Participating in national commemorations will increase feelings of national belonging.

### **The selection hypothesis: people who participate in national commemorations feel a greater sense of national belonging than people who do not participate**

Above we saw that many studies have argued that feelings of national belonging can be enhanced as a result of participation in national commemorations. Other studies take the line that participation in national commemorations is itself the result of a heightened sense of national belonging. These studies suggest that participation in national commemorations is merely a behavioural manifestation of attachment to the nation. Based on the *Theory of Planned Behaviour* (Ajzen 1991), it can be expected that, in general, positive attitudes towards the nation promote various behavioural patterns with respect to it. There are many different ways in which people can express their attachment to the nation, for example, by listening to home-grown music, watching national television series, reading domestic books or nationalist newspapers, waving the national flag or supporting the national team during international sporting events such as the Olympics and the Football World Cup (Fozdar, Spittles, and Hartley 2015; Meuleman and Lubbers 2013; Skitka 2005). In other words, people who have heightened feelings of national belonging can “consume their nation” in different ways (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008), and participation in national commemorations and celebrations can, in this regard, be seen as just another platform for citizens who have strong opinions about national identity to express these opinions (Kaftan 2013).

Another reason to expect that people with heightened feelings of national belonging will participate more often in national commemoration days is that it is also a way in which such people can show “the out-group” how they feel about their country. For example, in a study of the relationship between participation in St Patrick’s Day celebrations and national identity, one of the respondents said: “Patrick’s Day will show you and everyone, who’re Irish, they’ll all appear here in hundreds and thousands ... dressed in their green and white, and ... we send a great message across the city and across the world” (Scully 2012). In other words, people with strong feelings of national belonging more often participate in national days, not only for themselves, but also to send a message to out-groups. This can be explained by means of *Social Identity Theory* (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Taylor and Moghaddam 1994). According to this theory, individuals derive elements of their identity from an awareness of their membership of social groups. As people are socialized in the nation from early childhood it can be expected that the nation also contributes to the identity of people. Central to this theory is the claim that group members are motivated to view their group as being distinct from

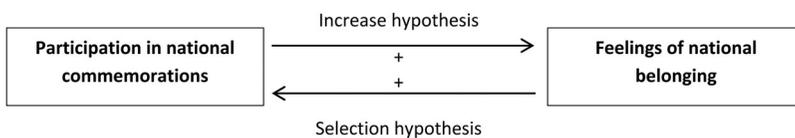
and in a more positive way than other groups (the out-groups). Successful national commemorations are one way in which people can reconfirm their membership of the national group and at the same time positively distinguish the in-group from out-groups (Schatz and Lavine 2007). Based upon these studies it can therefore be expected that people with heightened feelings of national belonging are more likely to attend national ceremonies than people with lesser feelings of national belonging.

Hypothesis 2: People who participate in national commemorations feel a greater sense of national belonging than people who do not participate in national commemorations.

The two hypotheses are presented in Figure 1. Even though these two hypotheses compete in some respects, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is possible that people who feel a greater sense of national belonging more often participate in national commemorations, and that these feelings of national belonging are even further heightened as a result of attending national ceremonies. In other words, it is possible that both hypotheses will be confirmed in this study.

### Previous empirical studies

Many stimulating studies have empirically demonstrated the positive relationship between participation in national ceremonies and feelings of national belonging (Coopmans, Lubbers, and Meuleman 2015; Fozdar, Spittles, and Hartley 2015; Lubbers and Meuleman 2016; Meuleman and Lubbers 2013). These studies are based on cross-sectional data (feelings of national belonging and participation in national commemorations are measured at the same point in time) and, as a result, they do not provide information on the direction of the relationship between participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging. Devine-Wright (2001) found that Protestants who participated in Orange Parades in Northern Ireland were more likely to identify closely with the group as a whole than were Protestants who did not participate in these commemorative parades. This is in line with the selection hypothesis. However, Devine-Wright (2001) did not examine differences in the feelings of group belonging before and after participation in these parades. Therefore, the study does not provide any evidence with respect to the increase hypothesis.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model.

In their study of attendees of the Dutch Liberation Day celebrations, de Regt and Van der Lippe (forthcoming) compared feelings of national belonging before and after the celebration in order to examine the extent to which events occurring during the national ceremony trigger feelings of national belonging. In this way, they tested the increase hypothesis (which was not confirmed),<sup>3</sup> but as they did not collect data on people who chose not to attend, they were not able to test the selection hypothesis.<sup>4</sup> At this point, as far as the present author knows, no study has examined both the selection hypothesis and the increase hypothesis by means of appropriate research designs. In this study, the two hypotheses were tested simultaneously. As they were tested by means of data collected during the commemorative ceremony on Remembrance Day in the Netherlands, we will first provide some background information on this ceremony.

### **Remembrance Day in the Netherlands**

On Remembrance Day, a national commemorative ceremony is held on Dam Square in Amsterdam in the presence of the head of state and various representatives of both the Council of Ministers of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the Parliament. The ceremonial commemoration generally takes place along established lines. Many authors have noted that this repetition is important in rituals (see e.g. Blustein 2010). In this ceremony, the king and queen place a wreath at the National Monument just before 8 p.m. Immediately after this, two minutes of silence are observed in order to commemorate Dutch war victims. As Walter (2001) noted, in multi-faith and secular societies words may become exclusive rather than inclusive and in such conditions silence is the most powerful way to communicate a message. Following these two minutes of silence the national anthem is played. The winner of a poetry contest for young people will then recite his or her poem, after which a speech is given by a prominent Dutch person. In 2015, Prime Minister Mark Rutte delivered the speech.

In the theory section above, we outlined four general reasons why participation in national commemorations may increase national attachment: such ceremonies evoke a shared history; they are organized around core national values; national symbols are abundant and attendance as such produces collective effervescence. These general characteristics also apply to the commemorative ceremony on Remembrance Day in the Netherlands.

The Second World War plays a central role in the national ceremony. In his speech, Prime Minister Rutte referred to it as “the humiliating war that happened seventy years ago, but is still so close”. During the ceremony, Rutte also talked about his family’s history and experiences of the Second World War. He talked about his grandparents, who lived through the bombing of Rotterdam (the very destructive bombing that killed 800–900 civilians and

led to the Netherlands surrendering to Germany), and his aunt, who died in an internment camp. Other people who placed wreaths at the National Monument included those who had survived the concentration camps, veterans of the Second World War, resistance fighters and people who lost family members during this war.

During the ceremony, explicit attention is also paid to the core national values. During his speech, the prime minister, for example, talked about brave Dutch men and women who fought and still fight for freedom, peace and justice, and one of the wreaths is explicitly laid to commemorate those people who fought for the rights of others, the constitutional state and democracy.

Moreover, national symbols clearly play an important role during the national ceremony. National flags and national anthems are among the most important symbols through which a country can proclaim its identity (Elgenius 2011). During the national ceremony, the Dutch flag is hanging at half-mast and the national anthem "Wilhelmus" is sung. Furthermore, the wreaths that are placed by the King and Queen consist of flowers in the three national colours (red, white and blue).

Finally, it can be expected that attending the national ceremony creates a feeling of collective effervescence. The national ceremony is attended by approximately 20,000 people, and although Dam Square is full of people, it falls silent during the ceremony: the only thing that you can hear are the flags waving and, now and then, a bird. Before the ceremony starts it is also noted that people all over the Netherlands will be observing the two minutes of silence at 8 p.m.<sup>5</sup> Knowing that at the same moment throughout the country people are doing the same thing for the same reasons might also contribute to a feeling of collective effervescence. When asked whether they had any further comments on our questionnaire or on the national ceremony, many people left positive notes such as: "Impressive!", "Beautiful" and "Very special to attend this ceremony". Therefore, it can be expected that feelings of collective effervescence are experienced as a result of attending this ceremony.

In summary, all of the ingredients outlined in the literature on the relationship between national commemorations and national belonging are present during this ceremony. To what extent attending the ceremony on Remembrance Day indeed increases levels of national belonging will be tested below.

## **Data and methods**

### **Data**

To study the relationship between national commemorations and feelings of national belonging we collected data before, during and after the national ceremony in Amsterdam on Remembrance Day 2015.<sup>6</sup> In total, 745 people participated in our study. The respondents filled out the questionnaires themselves, as

it is known that self-administration lowers the chances of respondents adhering to socially desirable response patterns (see e.g. Tourangeau and Smith 1996). The questionnaire was only given to Dutch speakers. All of the interviewers wore clothes branded with the symbols of the university and received an interviewer identification card bearing the logo of the university. This was to ensure that the respondents could identify the interviewers as representatives of an official institution. It took about ten minutes to complete each questionnaire.

## **Operationalization**

### ***Groups: pre-attendance, non-attendance and post-attendance***

As outlined above, we collected data before the ceremony started, during the ceremony (among people who did not attend) and after the ceremony. In total, 469 people filled out the questionnaire while they were waiting for the ceremony to start. In this study we will refer to this group as the “pre-attendance” group. During the national ceremony, we also collected data from people who chose not to attend. We approached these people, for example, in restaurants, or while they were waiting for a train at Amsterdam central station or just walking in the streets around Dam Square where the national ceremony took place. This group is referred to as the “non-attendance” group and consisted of fifty people. Finally, we collected data immediately after the national ceremony ended. In total, 226 people filled out the questionnaire after the ceremony. In the remainder of this paper this group is referred to as the “post-attendance” group.

### ***Feelings of national belonging***

In this study we employed the Perceived Cohesion Scale developed by Bollen and Hoyle (1990) to measure feelings of national belonging. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed (1 = *totally disagree* to 5 = *totally agree*) with the following six statements: (1) I feel a sense of belonging to the Netherlands, (2) I feel that I am a member of the Dutch community, (3) I see myself as part of the Dutch community, (4) I am enthusiastic about the Netherlands, (5) I am happy to live in the Netherlands and (6) The Netherlands is one of the best countries in the world. Answers to these items were summed to obtain a measure of the general feeling of national belonging ( $\alpha = .86$ ). This scale has been used successfully in other studies (Chin et al. 1999; Paxton and Moody 2003).

### ***Equivalence of the groups studied***

This study used static group comparison (Neuman 2012) to investigate the relationship between participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging. As this research design lacks random assignment as

well as a pretest, differences between our three groups that are related to national attachment might bias our conclusions. We, therefore, first examined whether the three groups differed regarding several key variables.

As we can see in [Table 1](#) there are significant differences between the groups regarding age, educational level, immigrant status and support for Remembrance Day. As age, educational level and support for Remembrance Day were also found to be significantly related to feelings of national belonging, we took these factors into account during our analyses. In this way, we could control for these existing differences and as a result they will not influence the conclusions we draw regarding the relationship between participating in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging.

## Methods

In order to estimate to what extent attending a national commemoration increases feelings of national belonging we compared the pre-attendance group with the post-attendance group (*Hypothesis 1*). In order to study to what extent people who attend national commemorations feel a greater sense of national belonging than people who choose not to attend a national commemoration we compared the non-attendance group with the pre-attendance group (*Hypothesis 2*). This means that the pre-attendance group was the reference category during our analyses. We analysed our data using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis.

**Table 1.** Differences between the pre-visit, post-visit and not-visit groups on several background variables<sup>a</sup> and their correlation with national belonging and national identity.

	Pre-visit	Post-visit	Not-visit	Correlation with national belonging
Age in years <i>mean</i>	40.45	38.25	29.25*	.18*
Female %	52.70	54.60	70.20	-.03
Highly educated %	49.00	65.90	50.00*	.09*
Immigrant status %	5.00	4.60	16.3*	-.04 <sup>b</sup>
Support for Remembrance Day <i>mean</i>	4.76	4.79	4.30*	.22*

Source: Own analysis of Remembrance Day study 2015; \*  $p < .05$ ; The measurement level of the variables was taken into account when calculating the correlations.

<sup>a</sup>Education: 1 = *universities of applied sciences and research universities*, 0 = *less education*; Immigrant status: 1 = *not born in the Netherlands*, 0 = *born in the Netherlands*, Support for Remembrance Day: To what extent do you think it is important to annually commemorate war victims on 4 May? (1 = *not at all* – 5 = *very important*).

<sup>b</sup>Coopmans, Lubbers, and Meuleman (2015) found that for citizens with a non-Western origin, participating in national days is associated with national belonging more strongly than for citizens with a native Dutch background. That might explain the non-significant relation between being an immigrant and feelings of national belonging in this study.

## Results

Table 2 presents the main results of our analyses.

The post-attendance group did not differ significantly from the pre-attendance group regarding feelings of national belonging ( $B = -0.46$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Apparently, attending the national ceremony did not significantly increase feelings of national belonging. Hypothesis 1, the increase hypothesis, is therefore not supported by the data. Furthermore, we see that the non-attendance group – controlling for age, educational level and support for Remembrance Day – has significantly lower levels of feelings of national belonging ( $B = -1.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In other words, people who chose not to attend the national ceremony scored lower on feelings of national belonging compared to people who did attend the national ceremony. This provides evidence for a selection effect. Hypothesis 2 is therefore supported by the analyses.

### Additional analyses

This study did not find support for the hypothesis that attending national commemorations increases feelings of national belonging. One possible explanation is that the ceremony was evaluated negatively. It has been found that failed and unconvincing ritual performances are in general less effective (Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006). To take this possibility into account, our questionnaire asked the respondents in the post-attendance group to evaluate the different components of the national ceremony. The respondents were in general rather positive about the ceremony, which received an average score of 8.23 (on a ten-point scale, where 0 = *very negative evaluation* and 10 = *very positive evaluation*) and no component of the ceremony was negatively evaluated. In other words, a negative evaluation of the ceremony does not seem to be the reason why attending the ceremony did not significantly increase feelings of national belonging.

**Table 2.** Summary of regression analysis of feelings of national belonging (B's and s.e.'s OLS regression).

	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	25.44	18.27 (1.21)
<b>Visiting national commemoration</b>		
Pre-visit ( <i>reference category</i> )		
Post-visit	-0.41 (0.30)	-.46 (0.30)
Not-visit	-1.87 (0.54)*	-1.24 (0.55)*
<b>Control variables</b>		
<b>Age in years</b>		.03 (0.01)**
<b>Education</b>		
Low education ( <i>reference category</i> )		
Highly educated		.58 (0.27)*
<b>Support for Remembrance Day</b>		1.22 (0.25)**

Source: Own analysis of Remembrance Day study 2015, \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

This study used one general measurement of feelings of national belonging. It has been argued, however, that when studying the relationship between participation in national ceremonies and feelings of national belonging, a distinction can be made between patriotism and chauvinism (Lubbers and Meuleman 2016; Meuleman and Lubbers 2013). Patriotism is the love for and attachment to one's country and chauvinism reflects the blind love for one's country combined with feelings of superiority. The scale we employed in this study (Bollen and Hoyle 1990) allowed us to measure these two distinct dimensions of national belonging separately. We re-conducted our analyses with two separate variables: "patriotism", measured by agreement with the following statements: (1) I feel a sense of belonging to the Netherlands, (2) I feel that I am a member of the Dutch community, (3) I see myself as part of the Dutch community ( $\alpha = .87$ ); and "chauvinism", measured by the following three items: (1) I am enthusiastic about the Netherlands, (2) I am happy to live in the Netherlands and (3) the Netherlands is one of the best countries in the world ( $\alpha = .74$ ). Respondents answered using a 5-point scale (1 = *totally disagree* to 5 = *totally agree*). Sum scales were created to measure these separate constructs. Again, no evidence was found of a positive relationship between participation in national celebrations and feelings of national belonging. The post-attendance group did not score significantly higher on patriotism or chauvinism than the pre-attendance group.<sup>7</sup> In summary, the hypothesis that participating in national commemorations increases feelings of national belonging is not supported by the results of this study, and this finding is not due to a negative evaluation of the ceremony or driven by different dimensions of feelings of national belonging.

## Discussion and conclusion

It is often argued that national commemorations have the potential to positively contribute to the process of nation-building (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983; McCrone and McPherson 2009). Many studies have also empirically demonstrated that participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging are positively related (Lubbers and Meuleman 2016; Meuleman and Lubbers 2013). We are uncertain, however, about the direction of this relationship (Coopmans, Lubbers, and Meuleman 2015; Etzioni 2000). Does participating in national commemorations increase feelings of national belonging (*increase hypothesis*) or do people who attend such ceremonies already feel a greater sense of national belonging compared to people who not attend (*selection hypothesis*)? Using an innovative research design, this study intended to shed more light on the direction of the relationship between participation in national commemorations and feelings of national belonging. We collected data from 745 respondents before, during and after the national ceremony on Remembrance Day 2015 in the Netherlands.

Based upon the literature, it could be expected that attending the ceremony on Remembrance Day would increase feelings of national belonging. There was a strong focus on a shared history (mainly the history of the Second World War), core national values were communicated (e.g. freedom, democracy and justice) and national symbols were clearly present (e.g. the national flag and national anthem). In addition, the ceremony was positively evaluated (on average with an eight). The study compared people's feelings of national belonging before they attended the ceremony with those of other respondents after attending the ceremony. In this way, we were able to test the increase hypothesis. We also compared feelings of national belonging of people who chose to attend the national ceremony with feelings of national belonging of people who chose not to attend. In this way, we could test the selection hypothesis. In line with previous studies (de Regt and Van der Lippe, forthcoming; Devine-Wright 2001), we did find support for the selection hypothesis, but not for the increase hypothesis.

The results of this study suggest that the general assumption that participation in national commemorations increases feelings of national belonging might not be tenable. More studies are needed in order to determine the *conditions under which* national commemoration days have the power to increase feelings of national belonging. It is possible and plausible, for example, that while participation in national commemorations does not increase feelings of national belonging in the Netherlands, this does occur in other countries. In the Netherlands, national commemorations are less closely interwoven with a powerful narrative of national belonging than, for example, in the United States (Kennedy 2012). The increase hypothesis might therefore be supported in a similar study conducted in the United States. Another aspect of commemorations that could be considered in future studies is the extent to which they leave space for controversy. There may be controversy in relation to many aspects, such as where, when and which events or people should be commemorated (Lentz 2013). Although some level of discussion and controversy might be good in order to keep the national day alive (Rigney 2008), it might also limit the power of the national day to uniformly increase feelings of national belonging. It has been demonstrated that Dutch people differ in their idea of what should be commemorated (de Regt, Jaspers, and van der Lippe 2016). It would be interesting to conduct this study in countries with varying levels of controversy in order to examine the effect this has on the integrative function of national commemoration days. Etzioni (2000) has also argued that not all national days are integrative to the same extent. Future studies should therefore conduct similar research in other countries with different public holidays in order to learn more about when national days might have the power to bolster feelings of national belonging.

This study examined the relationship between feelings of national belonging and attending a public national commemorative ceremony. There are also

many ways in which people can participate in national commemorations privately; for example, by maintaining two minutes of silence, hanging the flag at half-mast or following the Remembrance Day ceremony in the media. As actually attending the national commemorative service can be considered to be the most intense way of participating in national commemorations, it could be expected that if attending a national ceremony does not enhance feelings of national belonging, participation in other activities will also have no effect (Collins 2004). There are studies, however, which suggest that celebrating national days in private circles might also increase feelings of national belonging (Späth 2013). It has even been argued that home viewers have a more encompassing view of events, with the benefit of close-ups and multiple cameras, resulting in more specific and clearer experiences of the event than people physically present at the ceremony (Kuever 2012). The research field would therefore benefit from future studies on different effects of the different ways of participating in national days.

Many inspiring studies concerning the relationship between national commemorations and national belonging have employed qualitative research designs, such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, content analysis and ethnographical fieldwork (e.g. Fox 2006; Scully 2012; Späth 2013). Qualitative and quantitative methods both have their strengths and weaknesses (Matthews and Ross 2010), and in order to gain a reliable and valid understanding of the relationship between national commemorations and national belonging it is important to complement these insightful studies with research that uses quantitative methods such as survey data (Sorek 2011). In this study, we have, more specifically, used *static group comparison* (Neuman 2012). In this design, two non-equivalent groups were studied and compared. One weakness of this design is that it lacks random assignment and a pretest. As a result, group differences prior to the ceremony might be responsible for differences in reported feelings of national belonging. We took this into account by examining such differences and controlling for them during our analyses. Another design that could be used is a *one-group pretest-posttest design*. This would mean that the same individuals are studied before and after they have attended the ceremony. An advantage of this design is its ability to estimate the extent to which changes occur within individuals as a result of attending the national commemorations. One main disadvantage of such a design is the potential effect of *testing*: answering questions about national belonging might result in higher scores on these aspects on the second questionnaire and not be due to the fact that these respondents attended the ceremony. It was for this reason that we chose to use static group comparison in this study. Furthermore, we chose not to conduct a follow-up study. In other words, we did not contact the attendees a few days or weeks later to examine whether or not feelings of national attachment increased. It is possible that attending a national

ceremony does not immediately affect levels of national attachment, but that a few days (or weeks) later these levels of national attachment do increase as a result of attending the ceremony. It is argued, however, that even when communities of shared experience are successfully created, this feeling is likely to dissolve as soon as the crowd disperses (Uzelac 2010). We therefore expect that it is unlikely such a follow-up study would support the increase hypothesis. Nevertheless, it is important to note that all research designs – including the design used in this study – have advantages and disadvantages (Neuman 2012). Only by addressing the same research questions using multiple research designs can we gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between national commemorations and national belonging. Therefore, we hope that future studies will continue to use innovative and complementary research designs to study this topic.

Many important and influential theoretical notions on the relationship between national days and national belonging – for example, the seminal work of Durkheim (1982) – are based on analyses of small and relatively homogenous societies. Our findings suggest that the assumption following from these earlier studies – that national days automatically and uniformly have the power to increase feelings of national belonging – needs to be reconsidered and further elaborated (Etzioni 2000). Other studies have also suggested that national ceremonies do not by default produce unity or cohesion (Elgenius 2011). Before policy-makers attempt to use national commemorations to increase feelings of national belonging, more empirical studies are needed to understand whether and under which conditions national commemorations might have the power to increase and consolidate these feelings.

## Notes

1. We use the following definition of national attachment in this study: an individual's sense of belonging to the nation and their feelings of morale associated with membership of this group (see Bollen and Hoyle 1990). In this article, we define national commemoration as a state-supported service, celebration or day in memory of an important national figure or event, period, national narrative or founding myth.
2. Though in a German study it was found that exposure to the national flag did not affect participants' nationalism (Becker et al. 2012).
3. They studied participation in Liberation festivals. It has been argued that mourning rituals unite more than joyful occasions do (Bellah et al. 1985; Renan 1990). As a result, we might expect that attending the ceremony on Remembrance Day does increase feelings of national belonging.
4. Von Scheve et al. (2014) did test the increase hypothesis with a longitudinal design around the 2012 Football World Cup.
5. This central national commemoration is held simultaneously with local ceremonies in nearly every town and city in the Netherlands (Verhue and van Kalmthout 2013).

6. <https://easy.dans.knaw.nl/ui/datasets/id/easy-dataset:62408>.
7. Patriotism pre-visit group ( $M = 12.86$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ) and post-visit group ( $M = 12.51$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ), chauvinism pre-visit group ( $M = 12.58$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ) and post-group ( $M = 12.49$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## References

- Ajzen, I. 1991. "The Theory of Planned Behaviour." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 50: 179–211.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C., B. Giesen, and J. L. Mast. 2006. *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics, and Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Becker, J. C., A. Enders-Comberg, U. Wagner, O. Christ, and D. Butz. 2012. "Beware of National Symbols: How Flags Can Threaten Intergroup Relations." *Social Psychology* 43 (1): 3–6. doi:10.1027/1864-9335/a000073.
- Bellah, R., R. Madsen, W. M. Sullivan, A. Swidler, and S. M. Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Blustein, J. 2010. "Forgiveness, Commemoration, and Restorative Justice: The Role of Moral Emotions." *Metaphilosophy* 41 (4): 582–617. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9973.2010.01652.x.
- Bollen, K. A., and R. H. Hoyle. 1990. "Perceived Cohesion: A Conceptual and Empirical Examination." *Social Forces* 69 (2): 479–504. doi:10.1093/sf/69.2.479.
- Chin, W. W., W. D. Salisbury, A. W. Pearson, and M. Stollak. 1999. "Perceived Cohesion in Small Groups: Adapting and Testing the Perceived Cohesion Scale in a Small-group Setting." *Small Group Research* 30, 751–766.
- Collins, R. 2004. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Connerton, P. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coopmans, M., M. Lubbers, and R. Meuleman. 2015. "To Whom Do National Days Matter? A Comparison of National Belonging Across Generations and Ethnic Groups in the Netherlands." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38 (12): 2037–2054. doi:10.1080/01419870.2015.1023822.
- Devine-Wright, P. 2001. "History and Identity in Northern Ireland: An Exploratory Investigation of the Role of Historical Commemorations in Contexts of Intergroup Conflict." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 7 (4): 297–315. doi:10.1207/S15327949PAC0704\_01.
- Durkheim, E. 1982. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by J. Swain. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Elgenius, Gabriella. 2011. *Symbols of Nations and Nationalism. Celebrating Nationhood*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Etzioni, A. 2000. "Toward a Theory of Public Ritual." *Sociological Theory* 18 (1): 44–59. doi:10.1111/0735-2751.00087.
- Farquet, R. 2014. "Demonstrating for a Kosovo Republic in Switzerland: Emotions, National Identity and Performance." *Nations and Nationalism* 20 (2): 277–296.
- Fox, J. E. 2006. "Consuming the Nation: Holidays, Sports, and the Production of Collective Belonging." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29 (2): 217–236. doi:10.1080/01419870500465207.

- Fox, J. E., and Cynthia Miller-Idriss. 2008. "Everyday Nationhood." *Ethnicities* 8 (4): 536–563. doi:10.1177/1468796808088925.
- Fozdar, F., B. Spittles, and L. K. Hartley. 2015. "Australia Day, Flags on Cars and Australian Nationalism." *Journal of Sociology* 51 (2): 317–336. doi:10.1177/1440783314524846.
- Fricke, C. 2013. "Protocol, Politics and Popular Culture: The Independence Jubilee in Gabon." *Nations and Nationalism* 19 (2): 238–256.
- Gilboa, A., and E. Bodner. 2009. "What Are Your Thoughts When the National Anthem Is Playing? An Empirical Exploration." *Psychology of Music* 37 (4): 459–484. doi:10.1177/0305735608097249.
- Halbwachs, M. 1980. *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hobsbawn, E. 1983. "Introduction: Inventing Traditions." In *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by E. Hobsbawn and T. Ranger, 1–6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobsbawn, E., and T. Ranger. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaftan, Joanna. 2013. "National Identity During Periods of Controversy: Celebrating Cinco de Mayo in Phoenix, Arizona." *Nations and Nationalism* 19 (1): 167–186. doi:10.1111/nana.12000.
- Kemmelmeier, M., and D. G. Winter. 2008. "Sowing Patriotism, But Reaping Nationalism? Consequences of Exposure to the American Flag." *Political Psychology* 29 (6): 859–879. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9221.2008.00670.x.
- Kennedy, J. 2012. "Op Zoek Naar Een Nationaal Verhaal." In *Breekbare Dagen. 4 En 5 Mei Door De Jaren Heen*, edited by Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei, 13–17. Amsterdam: Stichting Collectieve Propaganda van het Nederlandse Boek.
- Koenen, B., D. Breet, and D. Verhue. 2015. *Nationaal Vrijheidsonderzoek 2015. Beleving, Houding En Draagvlak Ten Aanzien Van 4 En 5 Mei*. Amsterdam: Veldkamp.
- Krimp, R., and R. Reiding. 2014. *After the War. Commemoration and Celebration in Europe*. Amsterdam: Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei.
- Kuever, E. 2012. "Performance, Spectacle, and Visual Poetry in the Sixtieth Anniversary National Day Parade in the People's Republic of China." *Nations and Nationalism* 12 (1): 6–18.
- Lentz, Carola. 2013. "The 2010 Independence Jubilees: The Politics and Aesthetics of National Commemoration in Africa." *Nations and Nationalism* 19 (2): 217–237. doi:10.1111/nana.12017.
- Lubbers, M., and R. Meuleman. 2016. "Participation in National Celebrations and Commemorations: The Role of Socialization and Nationalism in the Dutch Context." *Social Science Research* 55: 111–121. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2015.09.006.
- Matthews, B., and L. Ross. 2010. *Research Methods. A Practical Guide for the Social Sciences*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- McCrone, D., and G. McPherson. 2009. *National Days: Constructing and Mobilising National Identity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Meuleman, R., and M. Lubbers. 2013. "Manifestations of Nationalist Attitudes: Domestic Music Listening, Participation in National Celebrations and Far Right Voting." *European Sociological Review* 29 (6): 1214–1225.
- Neuman, W. L. 2012. *Understanding Research*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education.
- Paxton, P., and J. Moody. 2003. "Structure and Sentiment: Explaining Emotional Attachment to Group." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 66 (1): 34–47.
- de Regt, S., E. Jaspers, and T. van der Lippe. 2016. "Explaining Age Differences in Positive Attitudes Towards National Commemorations: The Role of What People Commemorate." *Nations and Nationalism*. doi:10.1111/nana.12263.

- de Regt, S., and T. Van der Lippe. Forthcoming. "Does Participation in National Commemorations Increase National Attachment? A Study of Dutch Liberation Festivals." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*.
- Renan, E. 1990. "What Is a Nation?" In *Nation and Narration*, edited by H. K. Bhabha, 8–22. New York: Routledge.
- Rigney, A. 2008. "Divided Pasts: A Premature Memorial and the Dynamics of Collective Remembrance." *Memory Studies* 1 (1): 89–97.
- Schatz, R. T., and H. Lavine. 2007. "Waving the Flag: National Symbolism, Social Identity, and Political Engagement." *Political Psychology* 28 (3): 329–355. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9221.2007.00571.x.
- Schwartz, B., and H. Schuman. 2005. "History, Commemoration, and Belief, Abraham Lincoln in American Memory, 1945–2001." *American Sociological Review* 70 (2): 183–203.
- Scully, M. 2012. "Whose Day Is It Anyway St. Patrick's Day as a Contested Performance of National and Diasporic Irishness." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12 (1): 118–135.
- Skitka, L. J. 2005. "Patriotism or Nationalism? Understanding Post-September 11, 2001, Flag-Display Behavior." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 35 (10): 1995–2011. doi:10.1111/j.1559-1816.2005.tb02206.x.
- Smith, A. 2014. "The Rites of Nations: Elites, Masses and the Reenactment of the 'Nation Past'." In *The Cultural Politics of Nationalism and Nation-building*, edited by E. T. Woods and R. Tsang, 21–37. London: Routledge.
- Sorek, T. 2011. "The Quest for Victory Collective Memory and National Identification Among the Arab-Palestinian Citizens of Israel." *Sociology* 45 (3): 464–479.
- Späth, Mareike. 2013. "Madagascar's Independence Jubilee: A Nation's Holiday in Times of Crisis." *Nations and Nationalism* 19 (2): 257–275. doi:10.1111/nana.12019.
- Tajfel, H., and J. Turner. 1979. "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by W. Austin and S. Worchel, 33–47. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Taylor, D., and F. Moghaddam. 1994. *Theories of Intergroup Relations: International Social Psychological Perspectives*. New York: Praeger.
- Tourangeau, R., and T. W. Smith. 1996. "Asking Sensitive Questions: The Impact of Data Collection Mode, Question Format, and Question Context." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 60 (2): 275–304. doi:10.1086/297751.
- Uzelac, G. 2010. "National Ceremonies: The Pursuit of Authenticity." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33 (10): 1718–1736.
- Verhue, D., and R. van Kalmthout. 2013. *Nationaal Vrijheidsonderzoek 2013. Lokaal Herdenken En Vieren*. Amsterdam: Veldkamp.
- Von Scheve, C., M. Beyer, S. Ismer, M. Kozłowska, and C. Morawetz. 2014. "Emotional Entrainment, National Symbols, and Identification: A Naturalistic Study Around the Men's Football World Cup." *Current Sociology* 62 (1): 3–23. doi:10.1177/0011392113507463.
- Wagner-Pacifici, R., and B. Schwartz. 1991. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Commemorating a Difficult Past." *American Journal of Sociology* 97 (2): 376–420.
- Walter, T. 2001. "From Cathedral to Supermarket: Mourning, Silence and Solidarity." *The Sociological Review* 49 (4): 494–511. doi:10.1111/1467-954X.00344.
- Zerubavel, E. 2003. "Calendars and History: A Comparative Study of the Social Organization of National Memory." In *States of Memory: Conflicts Continuities and Transformations in National Retrospection*, edited by J. Olick, 315–337. Durham: Duke University Press.