

Henry L. Roediger, III and Olivia L. Jäggi. Nationalism as a Roadblock to a Transnational, Global World



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In “Memory, Identity, and Imagination: The Structure of Behaviour from the Perspective of Memory Studies,” Serguey Ehrlich provides a comprehensive summary on his view of the three topics in the title. Memory is of the past, identity is of the present, and imagination is of the future. Of course, the three topics are intertwined, because when we retrieve the autobiographical past, we do so using our current identity and, as many studies have shown, imagination fills in the gaps of memory and can lead to false memories (eg, Goff & Roediger, 1998). Correspondingly, when we imagine the personal future, we use our current identity and project our memories from the past into the future (eg, Szpunar et al., 2007; Schacter, 2012). Nonetheless, the tripartite separation of memory, identity, and imagination is useful, even if the categories can blend into one another in practice.

Another interesting metaphor Ehrlich advances is the understanding of memory, and especially collective memory, by using analogies from chemistry and physics. According to Ehrlich, memories are a subsystem of the guidance and control subsystem of behavior, and they are composed of molecules. In turn, these molecules are composed of three atoms (memory, identity, and imagination) and, in turn, each atom contains a nucleus that has three layers of schema (specific narratives, schematic narrative templates, and base mythic narratives). As if this were not enough to digest, the core of the nucleus has three fundamental particles representing three myths (the fairy tale, the heroic myth, and the myth of self-sacrifice). This framework provides much food for thought; we will leave it to other writers to address whether it will provide a fruitful avenue for understanding memory in general and collective memory in particular.

One overarching goal of Ehrlich's article is to advocate the creation of a global identity for all people in the world. An individual's identity should be, by this view, that "I am a person of this world" – a member of the broader collective. In this sense, collective memory should become globalized and transnational. However, humans have many identities – they can identify with their families, their schools, their religions, their sports teams, their towns or cities, their states or provinces, or their countries, to name but a few. We carry all these identities simultaneously, adopting one or the other as the need and context arises (eg, attending a church service or a sporting event). However, in the quest for a global identity, one competing identity stands out as a roadblock: national identity.

The modern nation state, commonly referred to as a country, is only 200-300 years old, yet it has become a powerful source of identity for people all over the world. People are proud to be French or Russian, or Argentinian, or Chinese, and so forth. When countries' teams are introduced at the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, they proudly wave their flags and the corresponding segment of the crowd erupts with cheers, exemplifying a moment of pure (if benign) nationalism. Americans, for one, often chant "USA, USA, USA ..." as their team arrives or competes. Of course, nationalism can be pernicious, and often is. Russia (or at least Putin) regards Ukraine as part of their/his nation and invades it in a ruthless attack; China regards Taiwan as a part of China and may invade someday to force a return (and an international crisis). Yet people from both Ukraine and Taiwan regard themselves as belonging to an independent, democratic country, with no desire to be overrun and incorporated into their totalitarian neighbor.

How strong is nationalism as a force, and can it be overcome to form the global identity that Ehrlich envisions? He remarks that we must imagine our identity as a global citizen in the future, saying that we must "systematically work on reshaping obsolete national identity into [a] global one: 'I am a human being' must be the prevailing identification of everyone" (Ehrlich, pg. 8). That statement is easy to write, but much harder to achieve. Our research indicates that overcoming nationalism is likely to be a difficult and enduring problem, and one that is greater in some countries than others.

We have developed a technique that provides an indirect indicator of nationalism. This technique relies on the phenomenon of collective overclaiming, first identified in small groups by Ross and Sicoly (1979). They studied groups such as married couples and basketball teams. They would interview married couples separately and ask questions about personal effort, such as how often each would take out the trash or change the baby's diapers. In the case of basketball teams, they would ask the active players on the winning team soon after a game how much of the effort to the victory was due to their personal performance. In both cases, people were asked to rate their

effort in terms of percentage, on a scale from 0 to 100. In both cases, when the individual percentages were totaled, they exceeded 100%; hence, people generally overclaim their own effort in any joint performance.

One reason for this pattern is the availability effect, as it was called by Tversky and Kahneman (1973): when some information comes easily to mind, it is over-represented in our judgments. In this context, a person (say, a husband) may have recollections of how often he changed the baby's diapers but might not be aware of how often his wife changed the diapers, and vice versa. Later research on collective overclaiming showed that the larger the group, the greater the amount of overclaiming (Schroeder et al., 2016).

We used this prior research as a springboard to ask about collective overclaiming in much larger groups: nation states. In our first study, we piggybacked a single question into a survey of university students in 35 countries. The survey, conducted by James Liu and many others (Liu et al., 2009) was about world history, with questions about many places, events and people ranging over the past 1000 years. Near the end of the survey, we (Zaromb et al., 2018) inserted the question "what contribution do you think the country you live in has made to world history?" The 6,831 students representing 35 countries in the sample provided an estimate on a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 indicating that no contributions were made from the students' country and 100 indicating that all contributions were made from their country. With the critical question appearing near the end of the survey, we thought students' ratings might be moderated by the fact that most of the questions preceding the critical one almost entirely reflected contributions from countries besides their own. That didn't seem to happen. The senior author of that paper (and the first author of this one) had predicted that we would find massive overclaiming, but he also believed that people from the United States would stand out in collective overclaiming due to the trope that permeates his country representing "a city on a hill" (Van Engen, 2020), or a beacon to democracy which other countries may admire and emulate. James Wertsch, our colleague, predicted that Russia would stand out. He was right and we were wrong.

Presented in Table 1 is the mean percentage estimate from each country, the number of participants who filled out the survey, as well as the 95% confidence interval surrounding the mean. Students from ten countries claimed over 40% responsibility for their country's contribution to world history, led by Russia at 61% and the United Kingdom at 55%. Students from the United States claimed, on average, 30% responsibility for world history, which is ridiculously high considering that the American continent was "discovered" by Europeans only a few hundred years ago. University students probably know more about world history than the general population, so estimates from a random sample of people in each country may produce even greater estimates of responsibility. The total responsibility claimed by students from just 35 countries was not less than 100%, as it should be with so many countries missing, but 1,156%! Keep in mind that the United Nations includes 193 nations, with a few others missing (North Korea, Palestine), so with estimates from all countries, the total would be orders of magnitude higher. These results show great levels of what we have called national egocentrism or even national narcissism (Roediger et al., 2022; Zaromb et al., 2018). Such results show great national pride, and this pride may inhibit any attempt to have people identify with the entire world. Because of the availability of heuristics and the fact that people are steeped in the history of their own country in every educational system, information about their own country will be much more available to them relative to considerations of the entire world.

How might such collective overclaiming or national narcissism be moderated? Prior research that has asked people to explicitly consider the contribution of other entities (people for small groups) will moderate their own claims of responsibility and elevate others. We tried this tactic in another large-scale study that asked people about their

memories of World War II (Roediger et al., 2019). Of course, we mean “memory” in the sense of collective memories, because few if any of our participants had personal memories of the war. We asked people in 11 countries (8 Allied, 3 Axis countries) to fill out a questionnaire that asked a number of questions, only some of which are relevant here. The Allied countries included in the survey were Australia, Canada, China, France, New Zealand, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We asked participants from these 8 Allied countries, on a scale from 0 to 100%, to rate their country's responsibility for the victory of World War II. We also asked participants from three Axis powers (Italy, Japan, and Germany) about their influence on the losing side, but we will not discuss that data here.

In Figure 1, we show the data from people in the 8 Allied countries to the question described above. The leftmost bars in the graph indicate the average percent contribution to the victory of the war when participants rated their own country in an isolated context. Three countries – the Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom – all claimed more than 50% credit for the victory in World War II, at (respectively) 75%, 54%, and 51%. As the data shown in Table 1, the Soviet Union (represented here by people from Russia) stands out as claiming great responsibility for the victory. Certainly, that claim can be justified in terms of the European theater of the war, if not in Asia and the Pacific theater. Still, people in just these three countries claimed 180% of victory in the war, and people in all 8 countries claimed 309%. Considering how many people from other countries fought in the war on the Allied side besides the ones included in our study, this is certainly another example of massive collective overclaiming.

Since prior evidence has shown that overclaiming can be reduced if people consider and estimate others' contributions to the same event or task, we also asked our participants to assess their own country's contribution in relation to others' contributions. Participants were given the names of the 8 Allied countries included in the survey, as well as an “other” category, meaning other countries' contributions. Each option had a box next to it where participants could enter a percentage; They could only proceed to the next question once the total had been added up to 100%. The center bars in Figure 1 show that each country moderated its claimed amount of responsibility when required to consider other countries' contributions. Australia, Canada, China, and New Zealand reduced their share of responsibility by more than half when the question required participants to consider other countries' contributions, and France and the United Kingdom came close to dropping by half as well. Russia and the United States represented the exceptions, with the United States dropping from 51% to 29%, and the Soviet Union dropping from 75% to 64%, a mere 11% adjustment. Once again, Russia stands out in collective overclaiming relative to other countries, despite being forced to explicitly consider other countries' contributions. Even under this condition, the total of the 8 Allied countries added up to 191%, so overclaiming was – although moderated – not fully eliminated.

The last bars in Figure 1 show the contribution to the victory of the war for each country based on the average ratings from participants from the other countries. That is, using the UK for example, the average in the third column is that of people from the other ten countries other than people from the UK. Now the total of the 8 Allied countries adds up to only 86%, indicating that the previously observed Collective overclaiming did not really extend beyond the nation. See Roediger et al. (2019; 2022) for a more detailed discussion of the studies described here.

The point for present purposes is to demonstrate how powerful collective overclaiming can be in a national context. Russians, in particular, seem particularly prone to such overclaiming in our studies (see Abel et al., 2019). Thus, ironically, Ehrlich's native country may present one of the greatest examples of nationalism and possibly one of the greatest impediments to taking a global perspective, although we think that it will be difficult for people in all

countries to take on a global perspective. After all, leaders of most countries are trying to increase national pride and nationalism rather than reduce it, and it is difficult to mobilize people about global threats such as climate change or nuclear war.

We agree with Ehrlich that encouraging people all over the world to take a global perspective and to see humanity as unified is a critical goal. As he writes, "Industrial Modernity, an identity 'container' of which is the nation-state, has led to the emergence of nuclear threat, growing environmental degradation, social inequality, and other global challenges that cannot be resolved within the national framework" (Ehrlich, pg. 6). The critical question is how we get from where we are – rampant nationalism – to where we should be – a global identity. Our hope is that the global identity would be most individuals' primary identity, taking precedence over the nation, the region, or the city they live in. Yet, given where we are, this is a difficult task. It is true that people have become identified with their nations in a relatively short period of time, more than hundreds of years since nations were invented, but such identity has taken hold of people.

As Ehrlich and previously Benedict Anderson (2006) have noted, nations are "imagined communities." So, perhaps we can use imagination, which Ehrlich advocates as part of future thinking, to imagine ourselves as part of the global community. One mechanism, as we have pointed out in this chapter, is to get people to think about their countries in a broader, global context. That form of imagining has at least been shown to tamp down collective overclaiming. Another method, a trope of fiction perhaps, is to perceive an outside threat such as an asteroid or meteor coming to the earth that would affect our existence, as in the American movies "Don't Look Up" and "Meteor: First Impact." Of course, climate change already presents a global existential threat, and it has been exceptionally difficult to mobilize people to address this challenge even on a national scale. How might we address climate change in a globalized context? It seems daunting to say the least, but it is not a lost cause just yet: during the height of the pandemic, the European Commission approved a set of policies that aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Europe, with the goal of making it a climate-neutral continent by the year 2050 (*A European Green Deal*, n.d.). This is a great example of collaboration beyond national borders and – if successful – will be an important step towards the preservation of our planet (and, consequently, the members of our global community). While most people do not identify as global citizens just yet, this type of cooperation between countries could be a promising first step toward a more globalized focus in our nations' policies and imagined futures.

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Table 1 - Estimated Contribution of Each Country to World History

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Country	<i>n</i>	Estimated Contribution (%)	95% CI
Russia	214	60.8	57.4, 64.2
United Kingdom	92	54.6	49.4, 59.8
India	154	53.9	49.7, 58.1
Hong Kong	140	51.0	46.5, 55.5
Malaysia	198	48.7	44.7, 52.7
Italy	129	44.2	40.0, 48.4
China	185	41.9	38.7, 45.1
Philippines	330	41.2	38.1, 44.3
Brazil	190	40.7	37.2, 44.2
Canada	189	40.2	36.4, 44.0
Indonesia	182	39.4	35.6, 43.2
Portugal	191	37.9	34.7, 41.1
Fiji	159	35.8	30.3, 41.3
Colombia	159	34.4	30.2, 38.6
Spain	209	33.8	30.8, 36.8
Japan	105	33.5	27.1, 39.9
Germany	147	32.7	28.9, 36.5
Mexico	192	32.6	29.2, 36.0
Singapore	218	32.5	28.8, 36.2
Bulgaria	226	29.9	27.1, 32.7
Peru	76	29.7	24.8, 34.6
United States	251	29.6	26.6, 32.6
Pakistan	98	29.1	23.8, 34.4
Tunisia	118	28.5	22.6, 34.4
Australia	167	25.9	22.0, 29.8
Austria	189	23.4	20.2, 26.6
Argentina	328	23.3	21.1, 25.5
Belgium	130	23.0	19.4, 26.6
South Korea	218	22.4	19.5, 25.3
Taiwan	291	21.1	18.2, 24.0
Netherlands	196	20.1	17.7, 22.5
Hungary	181	19.3	16.1, 22.5
New Zealand	137	17.7	13.9, 21.5
Norway	165	12.3	9.6, 15.0
Switzerland	144	11.3	8.7, 13.9

^aAs rated by residents from each country from Zaromb et al. (2018).

CI, confidence interval.

Table 1. Extracted from Roediger et al. (2022). Adapted from “We Made History: Citizens of 35 Countries Overestimate Their Nation’s Role in World History,” by Zaromb et al., 2018, *Journal of Applied Research in*

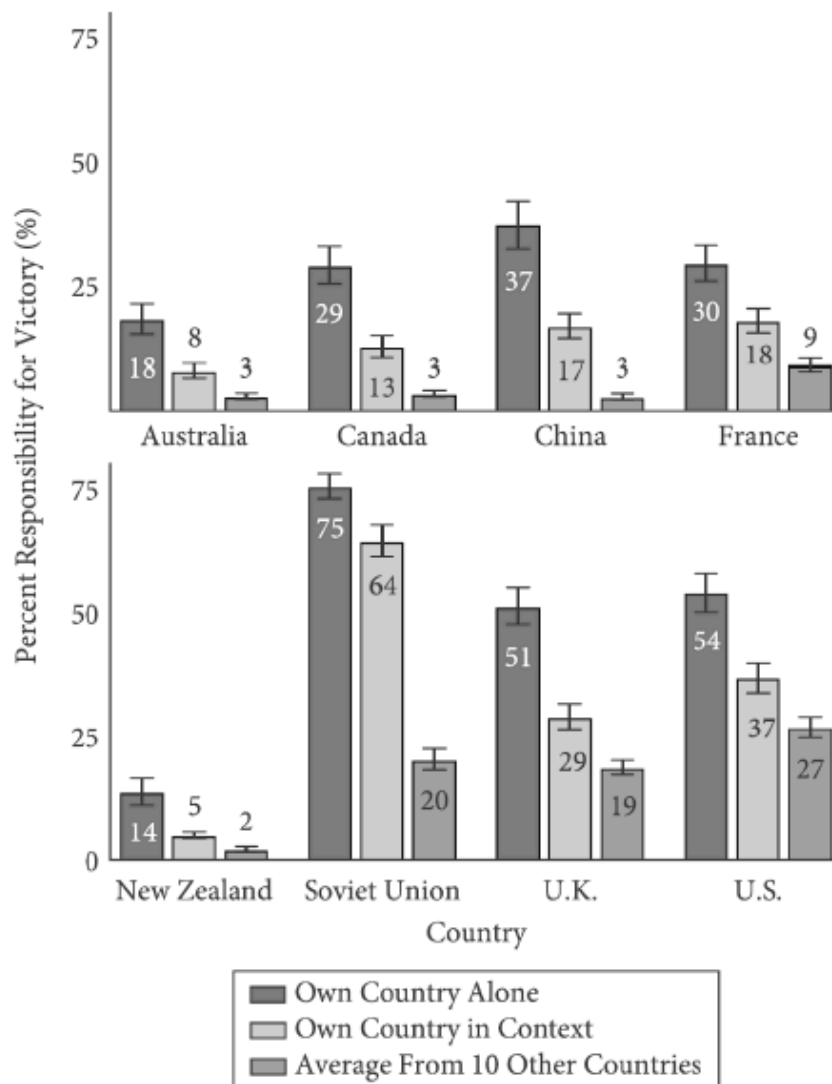


Figure 1. Allied contribution to the war effort as estimated by citizens of the Allied countries in the study by Roediger et al. (2019). Perceived percentage contribution to the war effort is depicted for eight former Allied countries. Ratings of each country's contribution to victory were provided by (1) participants concerning only their own country's contribution, (2) participants concerning their own country's contribution when asked in the context of seven other Allied contributions, and (3) when participants in 10 other former Allied and Axis countries rated each country's contribution. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

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