

# PTS SYMPTOMS AND EMOTIONS IN WAR-AFFECTED INDIVIDUALS

## Impact of Commemoration on Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms and Emotions in War-affected Individuals

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### **Abstract**

Collective commemoration is a widespread accepted way of expressing war-related traumatic experiences. Participation in collective commemorations elicits negative emotions among its participants. However, the association between negative emotions and different subgroups of war-affected individuals is unclear. This study aims at testing whether there is a difference in negative emotion after watching the Dutch National Commemoration between survivors of the Second World War (WWII), veterans and refugees resettled in the Netherlands.

Additionally, the relationship between posttraumatic stress (PTS) symptoms and emotional reactions to the Dutch commemoration was tested. A content analysis was conducted to map the memories and associations coming into the minds of refugees resettled in the Netherlands. This study was carried out among 101 war-affected participants using an experimental design. The results revealed that watching the national commemoration does increase negative emotions, regardless of gender, equal among the survivors of WWII, veterans, and refugees. Furthermore, the presence of more PTS symptoms contributed to experiencing enhanced negative emotions when watching the film fragment. These findings give insight into the meaningfulness of the Dutch National Commemoration and therefore possible areas for improvement.

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### Introduction

Exposure to traumatic events has long been recognized to have a detrimental effect on mental health (Munjiza, Britvic, Radman, & Crawford, 2017). These traumatic situations are associated with disrupted social, emotional, and cognitive worlds among the survivors (Lehman, Wortman, & Williams, 1987). A general response to the experience of trauma is sharing these with others (Pennebaker, 1990). A culturally accepted way of sharing, defining, and expressing traumatic experiences is through collective commemoration (Beristain, Paez, & Gonzalez, 2000). Schwartz (2001) defines commemoration as “society’s moral memory, distinguishing events its members believe to be deserving of remembrance from those deserving of being merely recorded.” (p. 2268). Participating in collective commemorations has various effects on a society and its members (Barron, Davies, & Wiggins, 2008). This study aims to explore whether negative emotions differ among the survivors of WWII, veterans and refugees from war-affected countries, resettled in the Netherlands.

Several studies refer to a verbal and non-verbal experiencing of negative emotions and feelings associated with commemorations, such as sadness, anger, bitterness and resentment (e.g. Barron, Davies, & Wiggins, 2008; Beristain, Paez, & Gonzalez, 2000). Whereas, feelings such as empathy and solidarity are positive feelings associated with commemorating (Jacobs, 2014). Ornstein (2010) suggested that these arising emotions enable individuals to mourn and work through the loss. While commemoration may also serve as a reminder to hold on to painful events and victimization (Oushakine, 2006).

Furthermore, some survivors of war-related experiences are taken back to their traumatic experiences and relive these memories very vividly during commemorations (Gishoma et al., 2014). When accessing a memory, the components of the associated

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emotional reactions are also activated (Bower, 1981). Research has demonstrated that individuals with posttraumatic stress symptoms, such as intrusion symptoms, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and arousal (APA, 2013) tend to react more emotional to events that trigger their symptoms (Hilton, 1997). Besides, Fisscher (1993) argued that women are expected to behave more emotional compared to men. A recent scoping review revealed that people with a history of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) tend to show an increase in stress related symptoms or negative emotions when commemorating (Mitima-Verloop, Boelen & Mooren, 2020).

There are different groups of people who experienced war in the Netherlands, namely veterans, refugees and survivors of WWII. The eldest group are the survivors of WWII. A study by Bramsen & Van der Ploeg (1999) revealed a relationship between exposure to war events and current PTS symptoms among Dutch survivors of WWII. Another study by Mazor, Gampel, Enright & Orenstein (1990) sheds light on the reactivation of PTS symptoms among survivors of WWII during commemorations. Responses to war memories, 40 years after experiencing the war, were mapped. For most survivors of WWII, their reactivation of memories and willingness to share their war experiences augments when confronted with these memories. PTS symptoms are also prevalent among veterans (Falk, Hersen & Van Hasselt, 1994). Severe injuries, perceived loss of control and witnessing or participating in violence are examples of traumatic experiences of veterans (Freedy & Donkervoet, 1995). Of all veterans in the Netherlands, 9% suffered from PTS symptoms up to six months after deployment and symptoms declined to 5.6% at two years after deployment (Reijnen, Rademaker, Vermetten & Geuze, 2015). Another large group of people who experienced war are refugees who resettled in the Netherlands. The number of refugees entering the European Union has doubled since 2015 (Rijksoverheid, 2019). Over 26.000 refugees applied for asylum in the Netherlands in 2018 (CBS, 2019). PTS symptoms are also prevalent among

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refugees resettled in Western countries (Devillé, Lindert, Grujovic, Lodice & Petrova, 2012). Specifically, the prevalence of PTSD among refugees and asylum seekers from Iran, Afghanistan, and Somalia in the Netherlands is around twenty percent, whereas the lifetime prevalence for the general Dutch population is 7.4% (De Vries & Olf, 2009).

The Dutch commemoration serves to keep the memories of the Dutch survivors of WWII and veterans since WWII alive. These memories are kept alive through specific rituals that are part of the Dutch national commemoration. A speech, poem, wreath laying, playing the national anthem and two minutes of silence are part of these rituals (Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei, 2019). There are reasons to assume that the Dutch commemorations does not have the same effect on refugees resettled in the Netherlands as it does on veterans and survivors of WWII. Firstly, an individual's cultural background serves as an important contextual factor in processing traumatic experiences (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999). A study by Beristain, Paez & Gonzalez (2000) shows that collective cultures do not reinforce open expression of emotions and do not consider self-disclosure to be important in contrast to the more individualistic cultures. Most of the refugees in the Netherlands come from a collectivistic country (CBS, 2019). The Dutch national commemoration does not commemorate the wars associated with refugees (Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei, 2019). Furthermore, there are cultural differences with regard to rituals present in commemorations (Beristain, Paez & Gonzalez, 2000).

The current research attempts to map the emotional responses to the Dutch commemoration among the survivors of WWII, veterans and refugees from war-affected countries, resettled in the Netherlands. As mentioned earlier, the emerging emotions allow individuals with war experiences to mourn and process their loss (Ornstein, 2010). Therefore, it is relevant to study the diversity in emotional responses to the Dutch national commemoration on different individuals, so it can be meaningful for everyone attending. This study adds to the existing knowledge by studying the emotional reaction to the Dutch national

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commemoration among different individuals with PTS symptoms. It was expected that the survivors of WWII and veterans would respond more emotionally compared to refugees resettled in the Netherlands, whereby women report a higher emotional reaction. Besides, refugees who have been in the Netherlands for a longer period were expected to respond more emotionally to the commemoration because they had more time to integrate into the Dutch culture. The second aim of the current study was to understand the relationship between PTS symptoms and emotional reactions to the Dutch commemoration. It was expected that higher levels of PTS symptoms were associated with higher levels of emotional reactions to the commemoration. The last aim of the current study was mapping the memories and associations coming into the minds of refugees resettled in the Netherlands. It was expected that the Dutch commemoration does not trigger memories or associations of their own wars. The current study is carried out using both quantitative and qualitative measures, whereby emotions are measured through self-report and with the qualitative part focusing on the experience of the Dutch commemoration.

### **Method**

#### **Design**

The research has an experimental design, derived from the trauma film paradigm, which assumes that showing a short film related to a traumatic experience causes a reaction similar to the trauma experienced (James et al., 2016). In the current research, the trauma film paradigm was applied by showing war-affected participants a fifteen-minute film fragment of the National Commemoration. The film fragment is part of the national news broadcast of the National Commemoration on the Dam Square in 2018. The fragment begins at 7.55 pm. with the reading of the memorandum by the master of ceremonies and ends with the laying of the last wreath by veterans at 8.10 pm. In this film fragment various rituals come to the fore, such as placing the wreaths, reciting the poem, the two-minute silence, and the 'Taptoe', which is

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the music, played by a trumpet or horn, which heralds the two minutes of silence (Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei, 2019). Ethical permission has been granted for the research by the Ethical Review Board of the faculty of social sciences of Utrecht University.

### **Manipulation check**

A manipulation check was conducted to determine whether the emotional reaction to the film fragment was comparable to the experience of the National Commemoration on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May. The extent to which the reaction to the film fragment in the study matches the reaction on the National Commemoration is examined with two questions namely, "Does your emotional response to the television fragment you have just seen match your reaction to the National Commemoration on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May?" ( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = .9$ ). This question was answered on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from much less intense (1) to much more intense (5). The low mean implies that participants' emotional reaction to the film fragment does not fully correspond with their emotional reaction to the National Commemoration on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May. The second question was formulated as follows: "During the two-minute silence in the film fragment, did you commemorate the same way as you would during the National Commemoration on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May?" ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ). This question was answered on a Likert scale, ranging from not at all (1) to a very high degree (5). It can be concluded that the participants commemorated the same way as they would during the National Commemoration on the 4<sup>th</sup> May to a reasonable extent.

### **Procedure**

All participants were recruited from the researchers' network according to the snowball method. In addition, letters with information about the research have been given to the nurses within elderly homes. Before filling out the questionnaire, the information letter was read by the participant, in which the purpose of the study was explained again, followed by information about the procedure, confidentiality of data and voluntary participation. By

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signing the informed consent, they agreed to the use of their data and indicated that they were aware of the purpose of the research and participated voluntarily.

A researcher was present with vulnerable participants, namely the elderly who experienced the WWII, participants diagnosed with PTSD and refugees who indicated that they needed this, to offer emotional support and additional explanation if necessary. Other individuals were contacted by email and were asked to complete the questionnaire online. The basic requirement for participation was the use of a laptop with a screen size between thirteen and fifteen inches and the possibility to listen to the sound of the film fragment through a headset or speakers. Participants completed two questionnaires, one before and one after watching the film fragment.

### Participants

Only participants who have experienced war were included in this study. A total of 106 participants completed the questionnaire and five participants were removed from the dataset due to not watching the film fragment. There were no further exclusion criteria. The age of the participants varied between 29 and 95 ( $M = 63$ ,  $SD = 17.6$ ). One of the participants did not enter his / her age.

Table 1

*Demographic characteristics of participants (n = 101).*

	(n [%])
Sex	
Female	31 (30.7)
Male	70 (69.3)
Participants	
Refugee	25 (24.8)
Veteran	46 (45.5)
Survivors of WWII	30 (29.7)
Education	
Middle-level applied education	18 (17.8)
Senior general secondary education/ pre university education	15 (14.9)
Higher professional education or academic education	50 (49.5)



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### Study instruments

The current research is part of a larger study and the relevant constructs in the context of the current research are described in this section. The questionnaire started with socio-demographics, such as gender and age.

**Positive emotions.** Five items derived from PANAS-X (Watson & Clark, 1994) were used to measure current positive emotions namely, concentrated, calm, inspired, proud, and happy before (T1) and after (T2) watching the film clip. A total score was conducted by summing all single items of the questionnaire. The questions were scored on a Visual Analogue Scale (VAS) (McCormack, Horne & Sheather, 1988) from not at all (0) to very much (100). The Cronbach's Alpha of positive emotions (T1) was  $\alpha = .79$  and (T2) was  $\alpha = .73$ .

**Negative emotions.** Five items derived from PANAS-X (Watson & Clark, 1994) were used to measure current negative emotions namely, sad, gloomy, angry, fearful, and ashamed before (T1) and after (T2) watching the film clip. These single items were summed up to form a total score. The questions were scored on a Visual Analogue Scale (VAS) (McCormack, Horne & Sheather, 1988) from not at all (0) to very much (100). The Cronbach's Alpha of negative emotions (T1) was  $\alpha = .83$  and (T2) was  $\alpha = .80$ .

**War experiences.** One question was used to determine war experience. This question concerned whether and where participants experienced a war.

**Post-traumatic stress.** PTS was measured by the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist (PCL-5) (Blevins, Weathers, Davis, Witte & Domino, 2015). Participants were asked if they had been troubled in the last month by the traumatic events that they or their loved ones experienced during the war. (e.g. "Avoiding memories, thoughts or feelings related to the stressful event" and "Regularly recurring, unpleasant dreams related to the stressful event"). Participants indicated to what extent the statement matched his / her life on a five-

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point Likert scale, ranging from not at all (1) to extremely high (5). All items of the questionnaire were added up to form a total score. A study by Blevins, Weathers, Davis, Witte and Domino (2015) showed a strong validity and reliability of the PCL-5. The Cronbach's Alpha of was  $\alpha = .96$ .

**Open questions.** Two open questions mapped the associations and memories that the film fragment induced and the rituals that most appealed to participants in the National Commemoration, namely 'What associations and memories did watching the film fragment evoke?' and 'What touched you the most while watching the film fragment?'. Finally, a third question determined how many years the refugees have been living in the Netherlands.

### **Statistical analysis**

To test whether there is a difference in emotion after watching the Dutch National Commemoration between survivors of WWII, veterans and refugees resettled in the Netherlands, a repeated measures ANCOVA was carried out using SPSS. A correlation analysis was used as an exploratory statistic for the ANCOVA. Besides, a correlation analysis maps the association between emotional response to the commemoration among refugees and the amount of time they are living in the Netherlands. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was carried out to map the association between PTS symptoms and emotional reactions to the Dutch commemoration. Lastly, a content analysis using Word was done to map the memories and associations coming into the minds of refugees resettled in the Netherlands. Before the hypotheses were tested, it was checked whether the assumptions (linearity, homoscedasticity, normality of the residues and independence) have been met.

## **Results**

### **Preliminary analysis**

Table 1 shows the correlations between the relevant variables. In addition, there appears to be a strong significant positive relationship between PTS symptoms and negative

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emotions (T2), which means that a higher overall score on PTS symptoms is associated with a higher degree of negative emotions (T2) ( $r = .71$ ). In this context, experiencing PTS symptoms goes hand in hand with a higher degree of negative emotions (T2).

Table 2

*Correlation matrix between the different constructs (n = 101).*

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Positive emotions before	-				
2. Positive emotions after	.505**	-			
3. Negative emotions before	-.352**	-.282**	-		
4. Negative emotions after	-.244**	-.278**	.615**	-	
5. PCL-5	-.330**	-.192	.574**	.709**	-

\*\* correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

### Repeated measures ANCOVA

After checking the assumptions for ANCOVA, it was found that the assumption of linearity between negative emotional reaction and gender was violated for each level of the war-affected individuals variable. Nevertheless, the covariate is included in the analysis. A repeated measures ANCOVA was conducted to determine a statistically significant difference between negative emotions before and after the film fragment based on war experience and controlling for gender. In general, negative emotions (T2) increased significantly  $F(1, 94) = 22.34, < p = .000, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .192$ ). There is no significant difference between the different groups in the increase in negative emotions (T2)  $F(2, 94) = 1.442, p = .242, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .030$ .

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Gender did not have any significant effect  $F(1, 94) = .004, p = .947, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .000$ .

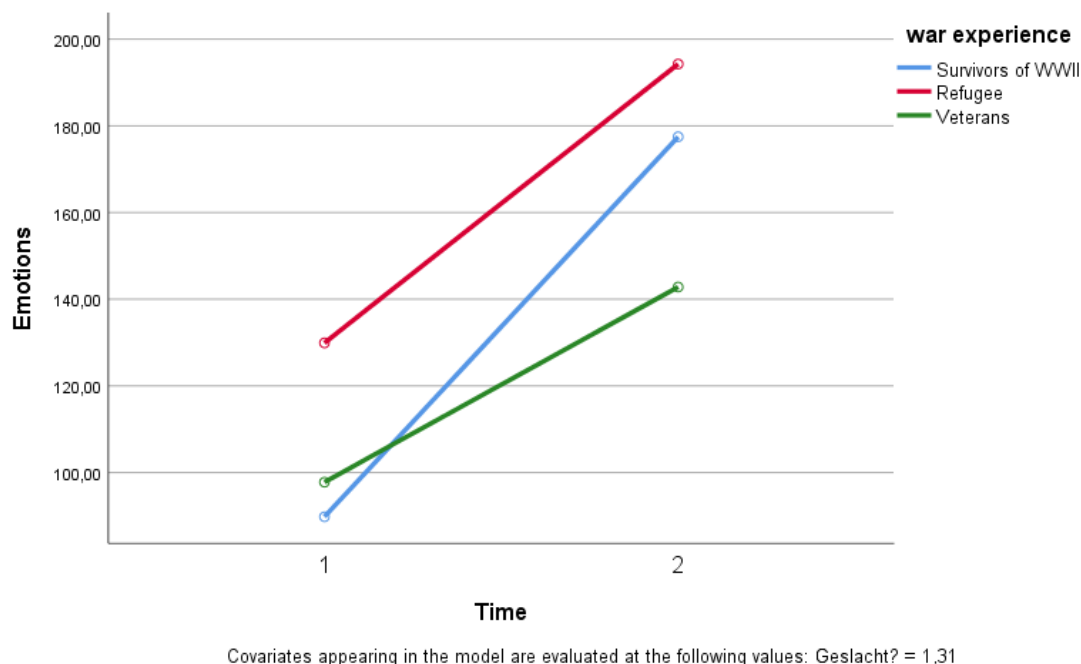


Figure 1: means negative emotions T1 and T2 ( $n = 95$ ).

### Additional analysis

Pearson correlation was calculated to test whether the experience of negative emotions (T2) among refugees resettled in the Netherlands ( $n = 25$ ), is positively associated with the time being present in the Netherlands ( $M = 16.4, SD = 12.9, \text{range: } 3\text{-}43$  years). There was no correlation between time being present in the Netherlands and negative emotions (T2) ( $r = -.021$ ).

### Hierarchical multiple regression analysis

Prior to conducting a hierarchical multiple regression, the assumptions were tested. The assumption of singularity has been met as the independent variables, negative emotions before, gender and PCL score were not a combination of other independent variables. The assumption of multicollinearity was tested by an examination of correlations and revealed that no independent variables were highly correlated. Residual and scatter plots indicated the

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assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity were all satisfied. The assumption of normality has not been met.

A three-stage hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with negative emotion (T2) as the dependent variable. Negative emotions (T1) was entered at stage one of the regression. Gender was entered at stage two, PTS symptoms at stage three. The hierarchical multiple regression revealed that at stage one, negative emotions (T1) contributed significantly to the regression model,  $F(1,72) = 45.8$   $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .39$ , and accounted for 38.9% of the variation in negative emotions (T2). Introducing gender explained an additional 0.09% of variation in negative emotions (T2) and this change in  $R^2$  was not found to be significant,  $F(2,71) = 1.0$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 \text{ change} = .01$ . Finally, the addition of PTS symptoms to the regression model explained an additional 19.9% of the variation in negative emotions (T2) and this change in  $R^2$  is significant,  $R^2 = .20$ ,  $F(3,70) = 34.5$ ,  $p < .001$ . The full regression table is presented in table 3.

**Table 3.**

*Summary of hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting negative emotions at T2 (n = 73).*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>B</i>
Negative emotions	.72**	.11**	.62**	.73**	.11**	.63**	.40**	.10**	.34**
T1									
Gender				21.96	21.94	.09	28.06	18.11	.12
PTS symptoms							3.44**	.59**	.53**

\*\* correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Content analysis**

A content analysis was used to map the associations and memories of the refugees resettled in the Netherlands. In addition, it has been determined what they are most affected

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by after seeing the film fragment. The answers of the refugees were categorized, and the frequency was viewed per category. The answers regarding which associations and memories came up could be reduced to six categories, namely 'No associations with their own wars ( $n = 3$ )', 'Damage that war brings with it ( $n = 3$ )', 'Connectedness' ( $n = 1$ ), 'Own war' ( $n = 6$ ), 'People are bad' ( $n = 1$ ), and 'Victims' ( $n = 4$ ). The answers to what most affected them could be reduced to the 'Suffering and resilience of people' ( $n = 2$ ), 'Victims and stories' ( $n = 4$ ), 'Respect' ( $n = 1$ ), 'Good organization of the commemoration' ( $n = 1$ ), 'Rituals' ( $n = 5$ ), 'Connectedness' ( $n = 2$ ).

### Discussion

The first aim of the current study was mapping the emotional responses to the Dutch commemoration among survivors of WWII, veterans, and refugees from war-affected countries, resettled in the Netherlands. The results of the current study revealed that watching the national commemoration does increase negative emotions, regardless of gender, among the survivors of WWII, veterans, and refugees. Increased negative emotions after reactivating an emotional experience is consistent with earlier research by Pennebaker, Zech and Rimé (2001) in which participants shared an earlier negative emotional experience followed by increased negative emotions. The results revealed that reactivation of vivid images, feelings and bodily sensations of a negative emotional experience elicited negative emotions (Pennebaker, Zech and Rimé, 2001). Increased emotional responses of war affected individuals when commemorating might contribute to the process of mourning by uncovering suppressed emotions (Musaph, 1990) which facilitates positive treatment outcomes (Parsons, Faltus, Sirota, Schare & Daamen, 1988). Therefore, the Dutch national commemoration can be considered meaningful for war-affected individuals.

Further, it was expected that enhanced negative emotions after watching the national commemoration would be more prevalent among the veterans and survivors of WWII

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compared to the refugees. However, there was no difference found between survivors of WWII, veterans, and refugees in their negative emotions before and after seeing the Dutch national commemoration. This finding can be explained by refugees' associations and memories that were evoked by watching the film fragment and by what they were most touched by while watching. The results show that refugees' own wars are frequently coming into their minds when watching the film fragment. This finding is in line with earlier research by Barron, Davies and Wiggins (2008) which revealed that thinking about war causes enhanced negative emotions. Additionally, war victims, storytelling and rituals in the film fragment were mentioned as most affecting part of the Dutch national commemoration by the refugees. This finding is surprising since refugees' wars are not commemorated during the Dutch national commemoration (Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei, 2019). Not only an individual's background plays an important aspect in commemorating (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999) but also the rituals within the commemoration are culturally bound (Beristain, Paez & Gonzalez, 2000). It is arguable that no difference was found between the three groups because the refugees found rituals to be most touching, causing their PTS symptoms to be reactivated, and subsequently caused enhanced negative emotions.

Furthermore, it was expected that refugees who are in the Netherlands longer respond more emotionally to the commemoration because they had more time to integrate into the Dutch culture. The additional analysis showed that the time refugees are present in the Netherlands does not affect negative emotions after seeing the film fragment. A possible explanation for this result might be that the used rituals within the commemoration are culturally universal. Moreover, the content analysis showed that the refugees were most affected by the rituals. Further research is needed to explore the role of culture in the use of commemoration rituals.

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The second aim of the current study was to understand the relationship between PTS symptoms and emotional reactions to the Dutch commemoration. The results revealed that the presence of more PTS symptoms contributed to experiencing enhanced negative emotions when watching the film fragment. Further, gender did not influence negative emotions after seeing the film fragment. These findings were confirmed by Hilton (1997) in which participants PTS symptoms were triggered by the media commemorating WWII. The current study contributes to these findings by implicating that triggered PTS symptoms cause an increase in negative emotions through quantitative research.

A few limitations regarding the current study must be addressed. Firstly, participant's emotional reaction to the film fragment is not similar to their emotional reaction to the Dutch National Commemoration on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May. There is reason to imply a lack of experimental realism because of factors missing that might contribute to a more intense emotional reaction, such as seeing other people being emotional. This might have caused the heightened negative emotions to be less extreme after watching the film fragment compared to being physically present at the commemoration. Secondly, participants watched the film fragment on their own devices in different environments which caused only limited control by the researcher. This might have led to results which are not representative of participants real feelings about commemorating, since they could have been distracted during the research. However, this was taken into account by asking participants if they fully watched the film fragment and removing participants who reported not watching the film fragment. Thirdly, war-affected individuals were asked to participate in the current study. It is plausible that there might be a selection-bias since some war-affected individuals felt too emotional to participate. Also, the number of refugees who reported their associations and memories is limited. This might have led to an incomplete image of their associations and memories.



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However, some strengths of the current study need to be mentioned. Firstly, due to using both quantitative and qualitative measures, an explanation could be given for the finding in which no difference in negative emotions was found between the three groups. Secondly, the war-affected participants include a variety of three different war-experiences, namely veterans, refugees, and survivors of WWII. As described earlier, the experience of negative emotions enables individuals to mourn and has positive treatment outcomes (Ornstein, 2010). Therefore, the meaningfulness of the Dutch National Commemoration, in terms of contributing to the processing of traumatic experiences, can be generalized to all individuals with war-experience.

To gain more insight in the importance of rituals in the Dutch National Commemoration, further research should be conducted among a more varied group, including participants with no war experience. Specifically, the effect of certain rituals within the Dutch National Commemoration can be compared between war-affected individuals and individuals with no war experience. It could be relevant to study if the engagement in commemorating differs for distinct subgroups, such as youth or individuals without war-experience. Investigating the relationship between commemorating and negative emotions among veterans, refugees and survivors of WWII provides insight into possible areas for improvement in formulating the Dutch National Commemoration on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May. These findings may inform the National Committee 4 and 5 May about the usefulness of the rituals in the Dutch National Commemoration on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May and can help to create meaningful rituals within the ceremony. Additionally, knowledge that the Dutch commemoration for people with PTS symptoms produces more negative emotions is also relevant for many others, such as therapists who work with traumatized patients.

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