

# From Moral Disaster to Moral Entitlement – The Impact of Success in Dealing with a Perpetrator Past on Perceived Ingroup Morality and Claims for Historical Closure

Fiona Kazarovytska<sup>\*a</sup>, Moritz Kretzschmar<sup>a</sup>, Pia Lamberty<sup>a</sup>, Jonas Rees<sup>b</sup>, Judith  
Knausenberger<sup>c</sup>, & Roland Imhoff<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Social and Legal Psychology, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Mainz,  
Germany

<sup>b</sup>Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence, Bielefeld University,  
Bielefeld, Germany

<sup>c</sup>Department of Social Psychology, University of Münster, Münster, Germany

<sup>\*</sup>Department of Social and Legal Psychology, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Binger  
Str. 14-16, 55122 Mainz, Germany. Email: [fiona.kazarovytska@uni-mainz.de](mailto:fiona.kazarovytska@uni-mainz.de)

Germany's past is marked not only by the atrocities of the Holocaust, but also by a history of collective attempts to come to terms with these crimes. The present paper focuses on the previously rarely explored consequences of perceived success in dealing with a perpetrator past for the moral ingroup-image and the demand for an end to the discussion of this chapter of history (i.e., demand for historical closure). In one correlational study ( $N = 982$ ) and three experimental studies ( $N = 904$ ), we found robust evidence for an association between perceived success in dealing with the Nazi past and perceived ingroup morality. Although the results on the assumed influence of success on claims for historical closure, mediated by morality, were only partly supportive and inconsistent, particularly when controlling for political orientation and collective narcissism, final single-paper meta-analyses revealed a significant association between morality and historical closure ( $K = 5$ ), as well as a small effect of success (vs. failure) on historical closure ( $K = 4$ ). Implications for understanding ethical self-views in historical perpetrator groups and recurring debates about a *Schlussstrich* on the German Nazi past are discussed.

dealing with the past, perpetration, morality, historical closure

# **Non-Technical Summary**

## **1. Background**

Belonging to a historical perpetrator group whose behavior clearly violated prevailing ethical standards can seriously affect the group's moral self-image. To regain a favorable moral self-concept and reduce unpleasant feelings of collective guilt, members of historical perpetrator groups may employ defensive strategies, such as demanding that a final line should be drawn under the past (so-called demand for historical closure). However, little research has addressed the possibility of regaining a favorable moral group image based on the perception of having already faced and successfully overcome the dark past. The demand for historical closure might then stem from the perception that further confrontation with the perpetrator past is no longer necessary because the group has already successfully dealt with the past.

## **2. Why was this study done?**

The present study, which was conducted in the context of Germany's dealing with the Nazi past, aimed at examining whether perceived success in dealing with the perpetrator past may increase the group's moral image and, consequently, claims for historical closure. We refer to this assumed effect as moral entitlement.

## **3. What did the researchers do and find?**

We tested our model of moral entitlement in one correlational and three experimental online studies. To experimentally increase the perception that Germany has successfully (vs. unsuccessfully) confronted its past, participants read a text that highlighted the achievements (vs. shortcomings) of Germany's dealing with the Nazi past. Subsequently, participants were asked to write down examples they thought could support success (vs. failure) in dealing with the past. Finally, participants' perceptions of Germany's morality and their agreement with drawing a line under the Nazi era were measured. Results consistently indicated that participants who were asked to give examples of successes in dealing with the past

perceived Germans as more moral, compared to how participants who were asked to provide examples of failures perceived Germans. However, an effect of engaging with successes in dealing with the past on agreement with historical closure was not evident in all studies. Final summary analyses across all studies (i.e., meta-analyses), which accounted for the political ideology of participants, revealed a small association between perceived ingroup morality and demand for historical closure, as well as a small effect of success in dealing with the past on historical closure.

#### **4. What do these findings mean?**

The present results suggest that acknowledgement of historical intergroup harm the ingroup committed does not inevitably lead to a negative ingroup perception, but, in conjunction with a focus on perceived success in overcoming the dark past, can be regarded as a positive attribute of the society, which ultimately enables a favorable moral group-concept. In addition, the results cautiously suggest that perceived success in dealing with the past can have a small influence on the demand for drawing a final line under the perpetrator past. Since this effect was evident in the combined analysis of all experimental studies (i.e., meta-analysis) but was not consistently supported across all individual studies, the present results should be considered as tentative support for the moral entitlement effect.

“The past is not forgotten”, the theme governing the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in Berlin, may be regarded as an encapsulation of the continuously ubiquitous German culture of remembrance. Germany’s attempt to deal with its history of National Socialist dictatorship has been considered a model of success for many other nations (Nijhuis, 2016). Its public admissions of past crimes supported Germany’s reappearance on the international stage as a morally accountable ally and promoted a sense of moral maturity resulting from the nation’s willingness to face its dark past (Wittlinger, 2011).

At first glance, this might seem surprising since recognizing the ingroups’ guilt has been discussed as a major roadblock to maintaining a favorable image of the ingroup (Adorno, 1963; Rensmann, 2004). However, this perspective neglects one dynamic that emerges when the focus of analyses shifts from the aftermath of the cataclysmic event itself to the consequences of dealing with the event: the development of a positive moral identity by perceived *success in coming to terms* with the immoral past. The possibility of reconstructing an affirmative moral group image by effectively dealing with past transgressions has received little empirical attention so far (Hirschberger, 2018). The aim of the present article is therefore to broaden the research focus from moral dejection caused by a negative past to perceived moral achievements by successfully dealing with the past. More specifically, we seek to extend existing knowledge about moral concepts in groups with a perpetrator history and to shed light on current debates about the adequate handling of a national past marked by historical ethical disaster.

## **Restoring Morality in Groups with Perpetrator History – An (Im-) Possible Case?**

Morality is one of the most important characteristics for a positive evaluation of the ingroup (Leach et al., 2007). According to the *Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation* (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), historical perpetrator groups, whose behavior has clearly violated prevalent moral standards, are particularly likely to experience a need to restore their moral

image in order to regain self-respect and social acceptance. A crucial way to retrieve a damaged moral group image is apology and reparation. Public excuses can pursue a variety of objectives, including demonstrating empathy for the victims and providing evidence of the perpetrator group's moral reformation (Walker, 2006). Prior research supports that public recognition of historical offences can lead the perpetrator group to feeling morally restored (Blatz, 2008; Zaiser & Giner-Sorolla, 2013), even independent of the victim group's perspective (Barlow et al., 2015).

One of the most prominent historical perpetrator groups, and at the same time, one of the countries that attempted to rehabilitate themselves by officially acknowledging the committed crimes, is Germany. Yet, it took decades until the memory of the Holocaust as it is present in Germany today was built up. Despite the Allied forces' measures of denazification and the Nuremberg trials against leading Nazi functionaries, post-war German society was marked by a focus on the suffering of primarily non-Jewish Germans (e.g., through the bombing of German cities) and a radical forgetting of the harms committed during the Nazi regime (Assmann, 2018). Efforts to confront the latter began to increase around the 1960s, when, among others, the Eichmann trial, the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt, and the production of the television miniseries *Holocaust* shifted attention toward German crimes (Wittlinger, 2010). Assmann (2018) refers here to a "return" (p. 583) of the memory of the Nazi past and a "case of embracing" (p. 593) the memory of the own nation's atrocious past, which is "unique in history" (p. 593).

Since the 2000s, two approaches to German national identity that until then seemed mutually exclusive have become more compatible: On the one hand, acknowledgement of the crimes of the past and, on the other hand, positive identification with the German nation - precisely because German society is facing up to its past and accepting responsibility (Wittlinger, 2010). Yet, Germany's way of handling its Nazi past was and still is under recurring debate: Especially conservative voices criticize it as a masochistic burden for the German population (see, e.g., Parak & Wunnicke, 2019), others praise it as a model of success (see, e.g., Nijhuis, 2016), and yet others criticize it, among other things, as an

inadequate, symbolic confrontation with the past (e.g., Habermas, 1987; Jikeli, 2021; Salzborn, 2020). Nevertheless, Germany's efforts in confronting its perpetrator history led to a successive reevaluation of the German national image. It promoted acceptance within the international community and German society itself, as affirmed for instance by the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Germany, as well as a growing domestic emphasis on Germany's post-war achievements, maturity, and moral standing, resulting from the nation's willingness to face the shadows of the Third Reich (Forchtner, 2014; Wittlinger, 2010).

## **First Comes Morality, then Comes Moral Entitlement**

But what consequences can follow from perceiving the ingroup as particularly moral? We argue that a focus on Germany's success in dealing with its perpetrator past may emphasize current moral advances, which, in turn, may enable the expression of attitudes that are considered inappropriate for perpetrator groups. This proposed adverse effect of perceived ingroup morality can be conceptually embedded in the theoretical frameworks of *moral licensing* and *psychological standing* (Miller & Effron, 2010). Moral licensing theory suggests that past morally commendable behavior can build up a moral credits bolster (Merritt et al., 2010), which subsequently allows individuals to act in less moral ways. According to the theory of psychological standing, belonging to a certain social group can provide group members with a subjective sense of permission to express attitudes that are usually corrected by the prevailing norm of moral correctness (Miller & Effron, 2010). Following this reasoning, perceived competence in dealing with the past can, on the one hand, be seen as morally praiseworthy ingroup behavior that constitutes a moral credit bolster. On the other hand, it may transform the former perpetrator group from a social group that is not allowed to express certain attitudes due to history into a group whose moral achievements qualify them to do so. We refer to this resulting perceived legitimacy to express socially sanctioned attitudes resulting from moral achievements or an apparent moral capability of the ingroup as *moral entitlement*.

Building on the theoretical idea of moral entitlement, we assume that perceiving the ingroup as particularly moral may bear crucial consequences for views on the adequate handling of the National Socialistic legacy. A recurring issue in this context, is the demand to draw a final line under the perpetrator history (historical closure or *Schlussstrich*; Imhoff, 2010b). Although heated debates about a *Schlussstrich* have been going on for years (e.g., Brumlik et al., 2004), they have encountered public headwinds and were repeatedly—particularly in the last two decades—publicly rejected as indecent, because a historical closure could deny empathy for the victims’ suffering and undermine recognition of the committed atrocities. But even though the current political agenda promotes a duty to remember in order to use the devastating historical lore as a moral compass for the future, surveys indicate that a large proportion of German respondents (55–60% between 1991 and 2013; Bertelsmann Foundation, 2015) agree with the proposal of a historical closure.

So far, the demand for historical closure has been explored primarily as a component of secondary Antisemitism in the theoretical light of collective defensiveness against the aversive feeling of guilt (e.g., Imhoff, 2010a; Rensmann, 2004). More specifically, demanding historical closure has been identified as a strategy to distance oneself from collective guilt due to past atrocities - particularly among people who identify overly positively with their nation (Kazarovytska & Imhoff, 2021). Yet, the demand for historical closure can also be embedded in the concept of moral entitlement. In this sense, perceived success in dealing with the past—and the associated group-based pride, precisely because the group has successfully faced the difficult task of confronting its dark past—is supposed to grant moral entitlement to express desire for closing the chapter of Germany’s perpetrator history.

Indeed, despite the Holocaust, about 76% of a German, nationally representative sample considered Germany to be very moral compared to other nations (Bertelsmann Foundation, 2015). Moreover, an analysis of public discourses revealed that admissions of past misconduct are often connected to a rhetoric of moral qualification: “we have successfully faced our dark past, have learnt the lessons and can thus ‘legitimately’ take the moral high ground” (Forchtner, 2014, p. 410). This finding is in line with observations by other

scholars, who have remarked Germany's "penchant for moral great power" (Wolffsohn, as cited in Mayer, 2018, p. 108) and a "moral know-it-all attitude" (Tatur, 2018, p. 1). Or, to put it in the mocking words of publicist Henryk Broder: "Nobody can emulate the Germans' Holocaust – nor the overcoming of it" (as cited in Nijhuis, 2016, p. 31).

## **The Present Research**

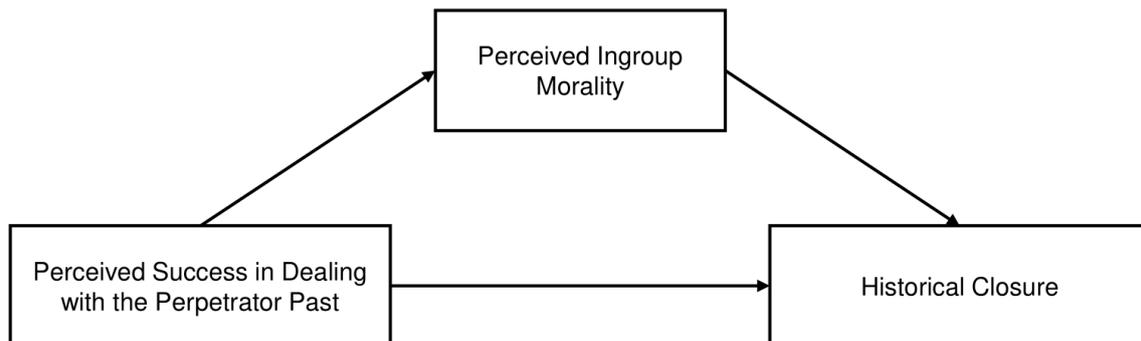
Based on the aforementioned arguments, we propose that perceived success (vs. failure) in Germany's dealing with the Nazi past can enhance perceived ingroup morality. Perceived morality, in turn, is expected to entitle the expression of desire for historical closure (Figure 1). We examined this idea of a moral entitlement process across four studies and an internal meta-analysis. The first study addressed the correlations between perceived morality resulting from the perceived capability in overcoming the immoral past, claims for historical closure, and openness toward refugees. Three subsequent experimental studies focused on the relationship between success in dealing with the past and morality, by manipulating perceived success in dealing with the past and examining its impact on perceived ingroup morality, with downstream consequences for historical closure (Studies 2-4). We also controlled for potentially confounding effects of political orientation, collective guilt, and collective narcissism (Studies 3 and 4). Considering that Germany's dealing with its past is a highly politicized topic, it seems plausible to assume that these three variables may play a role in the examined process.

Being a role model of dealing with the national perpetrator past might provide perceived entitlement not only to close this chapter of history, but also to express negative intergroup attitudes. Throughout the studies reported below, we therefore repeatedly included measures of such outgroup negativity as examples of socially sanctioned attitudes that people may feel morally entitled to express. As these exploratory analyses provided no reliable evidence, we report all corresponding results in the supplemental materials, but revisit them in the meta-analyses.<sup>i</sup> Pre-registrations (Studies 1, 3, and 4), data, analysis scripts, and supplemental materials are available on our OSF project site

<https://osf.io/un9wt/>. We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures for each study of the present paper.

## Figure 1

*Proposed Model for the Mediating Role of Perceived Ingroup Morality*



## Study 1

Study 1 was conducted as an initial investigation of the association between perceived ingroup morality derived from Germany's achievement in dealing with the past and the desire for historical closure. Additionally, we tested for potential downstream consequences on attitudes toward refugees. Prior research conducted in Germany found that group-based moral shame due to Germans' involvement in historical wrongdoing was linked to prosocial attitudes toward Turks living in Germany (Rees et al., 2013). The moral entitlement mechanism predicts the same association but assumes that moral pride due to *perceived success in dealing with the past* provides a source of legitimacy to express attitudes usually corrected by the norm of social desirability – particularly historical closure, but potentially also negative intergroup attitudes. Our pre-registered hypothesis thus was that perceived ingroup morality will correlate negatively with openness toward refugees, mediated by the desire to achieve closure on the Nazi past.<sup>ii</sup>

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

We included relevant study measures into a larger item battery of a representative survey (see Rees et al., 2019) that was planned not primarily to achieve power for a certain effect but to guarantee representativeness. The sample used for the analyses reported here comprised 982 participants. Data was collected by means of computer-assisted telephone interviews. Age ranged from 16 to 92 years ( $M = 56.6$ ,  $SD = 16.4$ ) with 49.1% female and 50.9% male participants. In line with our pre-registered exclusion criteria, responses from participants who indicated that they have a migration background and were predominantly raised outside of Germany ( $n = 34$ ) were excluded from the analyses. All items ranged from 1 = *fully disagree* to 5 = *fully agree*.<sup>iii</sup>

### Measures

Perceived ingroup morality due to successful dealing with the past was measured with three items (e.g., “Germany is a country that has learned from the mistakes of its past”;  $\alpha = .65$ ). Demand for historical closure was measured with two items adapted from Imhoff (2010b; e.g., “It’s time to draw a final line under the Nazi German past”;  $\alpha = .71$ ). Openness toward refugees was measured with two items (e.g., “Germany should take in more refugees from crisis regions”,  $\alpha = .71$ ). An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of these items is reported in Appendix C on OSF.

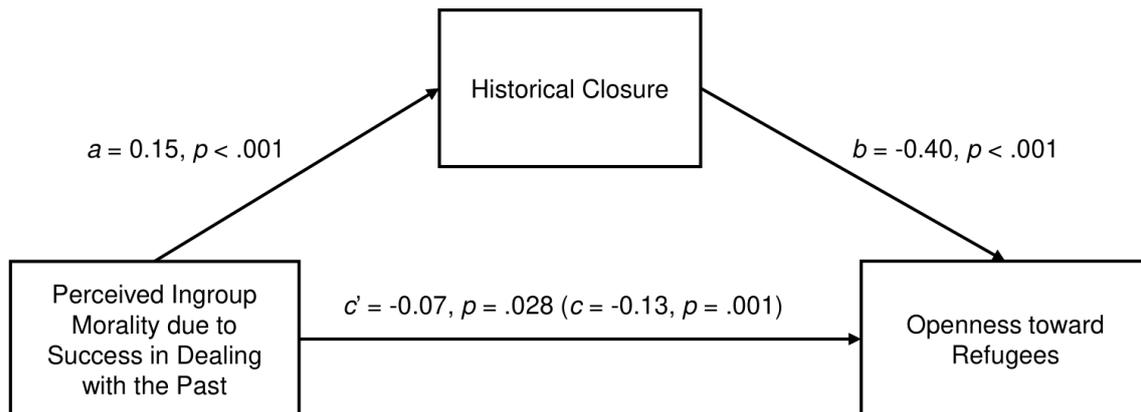
## Results

The mediation analysis using structure equation modeling (SEM) revealed a positive association between perceived ingroup morality and demand for historical closure, and a negative association between demand for historical closure and openness toward refugees, as well as a significant direct link between morality and openness toward refugees (Figure 2). Accompanied by a significant indirect effect calculated using 5000 bootstrap-resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008),  $a*b = -0.06$ , 95% CI [-0.09, -0.03],  $p < .001$ , and a significant total

effect, this pattern of results was compatible with our hypothesis that desire for historical closure partially mediated the relationship between morality and openness toward refugees.

## Figure 2

*Simple Mediation of Morality on Openness toward Refugees (Completely Standardized Solution)*



*Note.* Total effect ( $c$ ) in parentheses after the direct effect ( $c'$ ).

## Discussion

Participants who perceived Germans as highly moral due to Germany's way of dealing with its Nazi past also agreed more with the demand for historical closure and expressed less openness toward refugees in Germany. Although such a correlational statistical mediation does not confirm our theoretical reasoning, it is compatible with it. The next studies built on these initial results and aimed to experimentally manipulate perceived success in dealing with the past.

## Study 2

Study 2 aimed at providing experimental support for the causal impact of success in dealing with the past on the demand for historical closure via enhanced ingroup morality. We hypothesized that experimentally emphasizing success (vs. failure) in dealing with the past would enhance perceived ingroup morality, and hence increase demands for historical

closure, compared to reminders of failure. Furthermore, we tested whether this proposed mediation would remain stable, even when controlling for political orientation. Controlling for political orientation seems particularly relevant, since especially current right-wing voices emphasize that Germany has already dealt enough with its past (i.e., perceived success) and reject a further confrontation with past crimes (i.e., historical closure; Parak & Wunnicke, 2019).

## Method

### Sample

The study was conducted for the second author's master thesis. As typical for these kind of data collections, the goal was to collect as many participants as possible within a fixed time frame (five weeks). The study was advertised as an online survey on attitudes toward German history via social media and a university mailing list. Out of 282 participants who completed the survey entirely, 19 participants were excluded since they were not German, they were Jewish, or they completed the experiment extremely quickly according to the MAD criterion with a threshold value of 2.5 (Leys et al., 2013). Further, 33 individuals ( $n_{success} = 14$ ,  $n_{failure} = 19$ ) were excluded due to non-compliant answers in the priming task (see below). The final sample thus included 232 participants ( $n_{success} = 76$ ,  $n_{failure} = 65$ ), aged 18 - 66 years ( $M = 25.7$  years,  $SD = 7.1$ ; 75% female and 24% male respondents).

### Independent Variable

To manipulate perceived success in dealing with the past, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the *success* condition, participants read an article emphasizing that researchers and the former Federal President Joachim Gauck consider Germany's handling of the Nazi past to be exemplary. Conversely, in the article of the *failure* condition, participants read that researchers and the Federal President agreed that Germany's way of dealing with the past is shameful. To describe Joachim Gauck's views his speech in the Bundestag on January 27, 2015 was used, in which he highlighted both successes and shortcomings in Germany's dealing with its past (see Appendix D on OSF for

details). A third group of participants was assigned to a control condition without any articles. Participants then either had to provide supporting examples for the position described in the text or – in the control condition – write a short weather report. Two independent raters coded whether the responses contained examples supporting the priming material from the respective condition. Participants who did not give any examples or explicitly disagreed with the views expressed in the article were excluded from the analyses.

### **Procedure and Measures**

After finishing the priming task, participants in all three conditions completed four filler items on military deployment in crisis regions and subsequently two items on perceived ingroup morality (“Germany is very moral compared to other countries” and “Germany deals with its past in a very moral and responsible manner”,  $\alpha = .83$ )<sup>iv</sup>, on scales ranging from 1 (*fully disagree*) to 7 (*fully agree*). They also completed a five-item measure of demand for historical closure ( $\alpha = .74$ ; Imhoff, 2010b; see also Study 1), on scales ranging from 1 (*fully disagree*) to 5 (*fully agree*). Subsequently, political orientation was assessed: We presented eight well-known German parties to the participants (CDU, SPD, FDP, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, Die Linke, AfD, NPD, and Piraten) and asked which party -if any- they would vote for in a federal election. We then used the ratings of the overall ideological stance of these parties provided by the Chapel Hill expert survey (Bakker et al., 2020) to convert party preference to a numeric score ranging from 0 (*extreme left*) to 10 (*extreme right*). Since not all participants indicated that they would vote for one of these parties, we included only 213 participants in the analyses involving political orientation.

### **Results**

Descriptive statistics are given in Table 1. The groups differed significantly in historical closure,  $F(2, 229) = 10.98, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ , and perceived ingroup morality,  $F(2, 229) = 6.39, p = .002, \eta^2 = .05$ . Bonferroni-Holm corrected pairwise comparisons revealed significant differences in historical closure between the success and failure group,  $t(138) = -3.24, p = .003, d = 0.54$ , as well as the failure and control group,  $t(145) = -4.82, p < .001, d = 0.77$ , but not between the success and control group,  $t(158) = -1.34, p = .169, d = 0.21$ .

Perceived morality differed significantly between the success and failure condition,  $t(133) = -3.32$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $d = 0.56$ , as well as the failure and control group,  $t(138) = -3.24$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $d = 0.54$ , but not between the success and control group,  $t(158) = 0.76$ ,  $p = .458$ ,  $d = 0.12$ . There were no group differences in political orientation,  $F(2, 210) = 0.65$ ,  $p = .524$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ .

**Table 1**

*Summary of Means and Standard Deviations*

Group	Perceived Ingroup					
	Historical Closure		Morality		Political Orientation	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Success	2.39	0.94	5.17	1.20	3.67	1.54
Failure	1.85	1.07	4.45	1.28	3.81	1.58
Control	2.62	1.04	5.02	1.18	4.00	2.08

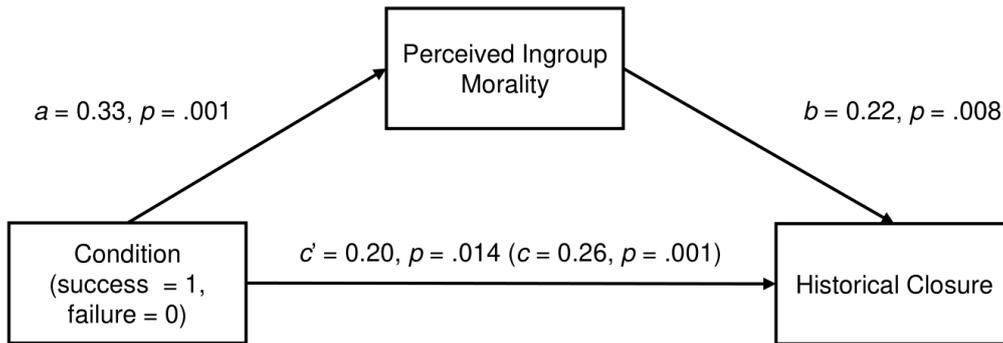
*Note.* Higher scores indicate stronger approval in the direction of the construct measurement.

**Mediation**

The mediation analysis in SEM revealed that morality was significantly affected by condition, which in turn significantly predicted demand for historical closure (Figure 3). Two-sided 95%-bootstrap confidence intervals, calculated using 5000 bootstrap-resamples, further indicated a significant indirect effect on historical closure,  $a*b = 0.06$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.10],  $p = .020$ . Since the direct and total effects were also significant, a partial mediation via morality can be assumed.

**Figure 3**

*Simple Mediation of Condition on the Demand for Historical Closure (Completely Standardized Solution)*



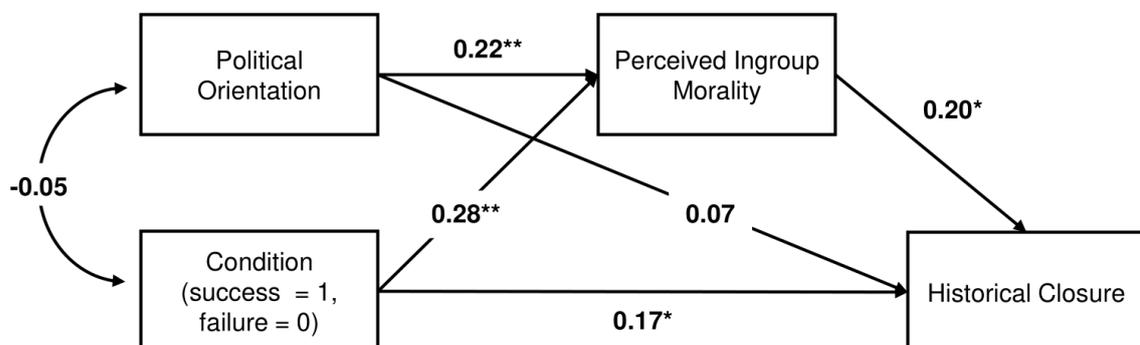
Note. Total effect (c) in parentheses after the direct effect (c').

### Controlling for Political Orientation

To control for political orientation, we calculated the mediation model with the 213 participants who stated that they would vote for one of the given parties and additionally included political orientation as a further exogenous predictor of morality and historical closure, which was allowed to correlate with condition. Even after controlling for political orientation, the aforementioned pattern of results remained robust (Figure 4). The indirect effect,  $a*b = 0.06$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.10],  $p = .035$ , and the total effect  $c = c' + a*b = 0.23$ , 95% CI [0.06, 0.39],  $p = .007$ , were significant as well.

**Figure 4**

*Path Coefficients (Completely Standardized Solution) in the Simple Mediation When Controlling for Political Orientation*



Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

### **Additional Analyses of Non-Conforming Participants**

Additionally, we tested for differences between the participants included in the calculations (experimental groups) and those who were excluded from analyses due to non-conforming examples in one of the two experimental conditions (dropout groups). Indeed, desire for historical closure was significantly higher in the failure dropout group ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) than in the failure experimental group, as indicated by a Wilcoxon rank-sum test,  $W_s = 375$ ,  $z = -2.61$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $r = -.29$ . There were no significant differences with regard to other relevant variables (see Appendix E on OSF).

### **Discussion**

Reminders of success in dealing with the past enhanced perceived ingroup morality, which in turn mediated the relation between success and demands for historical closure, even when controlling for political orientation. Thus, the results of Study 2 supported our proposed mediation model. However, several participants were dropped from the analyses as they failed to provide answers in line with the presented text. In the failure condition, demand for historical closure among these dropouts was significantly higher than among those remaining in the sample. Prior research indicated that desire for historical closure is particularly high among group members who want to shield their positive ingroup image from criticism (i.e., collective narcissists; Imhoff, 2010a; Kazarovytska & Imhoff, 2021). Since failure in dealing with the past can pose a serious threat to the ingroup image, dropping out of the failure group may have been especially likely for those participants who aimed at defending their favorable ingroup image.

It is important to note that compared to the control group, reminders of failure decreased (rather than success increased) perceived morality and demands for historical closure. In other words, the perception that Germany is handling its past morally seemed to be the baseline perception from which the failure condition deviated. Accompanied by the finding that several participants who dropped out of the failure group stated in their open-ended responses that they do not know any examples which substantiate failure in dealing with the past or even gave examples of success, it also seems possible that these

participants just fundamentally disagreed with the opinion of the failure article. Seen in this light, the difference in historical closure between the experimental failure group and the failure dropout group might be in line with the assumed moral entitlement effect. To further substantiate the proposed moral entitlement process and to narrow down its boundary conditions, the next study aimed at replicating the present findings while additionally controlling for collective narcissism and collective guilt.

### Study 3

Our pre-registered hypothesis was that reminders of success in dealing with the past would increase claims for historical closure compared to reminders of failure, mediated by perceived ingroup morality. Moreover, Study 3 sought to gain a better understanding of the dropouts. In general, a discussion of Germany's handling of the Nazi past can be interpreted as an indication of Germans' past or present misconduct. Particularly among collective narcissists, who hold an exaggeratedly positive image of the ingroup that they protect against any kind of criticism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009), this confrontation with the ingroup's misbehavior may have provoked defensive reactions – for instance, the refusal to mention examples that support Germany's shortcomings in dealing with its past. To increase the validity of the present research, it thus seemed important to control for potentially confounding effects of collective narcissism.

A confrontation with the Nazi crimes may evoke feelings of *collective guilt* (i.e., an aversive emotion that arises when one's group is responsible for historical misdeeds) in Germans (Imhoff et al., 2013). Additional allegations of insufficient mastery of this past might be interpreted as an indication of the ingroup's ongoing misconduct, which may reinforce the experience of guilt. Conversely, the accentuation of acts of reparation might reduce collective guilt (Branscombe et al., 2002), which could reinforce the desire for historical closure that previous studies have shown to be negatively related to guilt (Imhoff, 2010a). Thus, we additionally controlled for potentially mediating effects through collective guilt.

## Method

### Sample

Based on a power analysis conducted using the meta-analytic average of standardized mean differences in historical closure obtained in Studies S2 and 2 ( $d = 0.40$ ), we strived to reach 100 participants per cell to achieve a power of 80%. In addition, we aimed to balance for potential dropouts by collecting another 50 participants. Participants were recruited mainly via social media for an online survey on attitudes toward German history. As compensation, participants were entered into a raffle for one of three gift vouchers for an online store (EUR 20 each). Out of the 407 participants who completed the experiment entirely, 37 participants were excluded from the analyses, as pre-registered, due to non-German nationality, belonging to the target outgroups, indication of having clicked randomly, or extremely fast completion with relative speed index  $> 2.0$  (Leiner, 2019). Also as pre-registered, another 64 participants ( $n_{success} = 28$ ,  $n_{failure} = 36$ ) were excluded because they did not provide examples that showed they had paid attention to the priming task, as found by two independent raters who used the same coding method as in Study 2. This resulted in a final sample of 306 ( $n_{success} = 88$ ,  $n_{failure} = 74$ ) participants ( $M = 34.9$  years,  $SD = 13.7$ , age ranged from 16 to 79) with more female (69%) than male (30%) and diverse (1%)<sup>v</sup> respondents.

### Independent Variable, Procedure and Measures

We used the same manipulation as in Study 2. However, this time participants were asked to complete questionnaires on collective narcissism and political orientation before they were randomly assigned to one of the three study conditions. Afterwards, participants in all three conditions completed questionnaires on ingroup morality, historical closure, and collective guilt. Collective narcissism was measured with the nine-item scale by Golec de Zavala et al. (2009; e.g., “The Germans deserve special treatment”;  $\alpha = .90$ ).<sup>vi</sup> Political orientation was assessed by the participants’ self-classification within a political spectrum from 1 (*extremely left*) to 10 (*extremely right*) and with three items derived from the German Authoritarianism Short Scale KSA-3 by Beierlein and colleagues (2014). All four items were

z-standardized and combined to an additive score without weighting ( $\alpha = .63$ ). Ingroup morality ( $\alpha = .63$ ) and historical closure ( $\alpha = .91$ ) were assessed with the same items as in Study 2. Collective guilt was measured by two items adapted from Branscombe et al. (2004, e.g., "I feel guilty for the terrible things the Germans brought upon the Jews";  $\alpha = .94$ ). Except for the political spectrum-item, all items ranged from 1 (*fully disagree*) to 7 (*fully agree*).

## Results

The groups differed significantly in their demand for historical closure,  $F(2, 303) = 5.51, p = .005, \eta^2 = .04$ , and morality,  $F(2, 303) = 7.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$  (Table 2). However, Bonferroni-Holm corrected pairwise *t*-tests did not indicate significant differences in historical closure between the success and failure condition,  $t(153) = 1.29, p = .232, d = 0.21$ . Yet, the finding from Study 2 that historical closure was significantly higher in the control than in the failure group was replicated,  $t(166) = -3.22, p = .005, d = 0.44$ . Success and control condition did not differ significantly in their claims for historical closure,  $t(209) = -2.03, p = .097, d = 0.26$ . Perceived morality was significantly higher in the success than in the failure group,  $t(160) = 3.79, p < .001, d = 0.59$ . There were no significant differences in perceived morality between success and control condition,  $t(167) = 2.04, p = .058, d = 0.28$ , or failure and control condition,  $t(154) = -2.33, p = .058, d = 0.33$ . The groups did not differ in collective guilt,  $F(2, 303) = 1.69, p = .186, \eta^2 = .01$ , collective narcissism,  $F(2, 303) = 1.04, p = .353, \eta^2 = .00$ , or political orientation,  $F(2, 303) = 0.87, p = .420, \eta^2 = .00$ .

**Table 2***Summary of Means and Standard Deviations*

Group	Perceived									
	Historical Closure		Ingroup Morality		Collective Guilt		Collective Narcissism		Political Orientation	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M<sub>z</sub></i>	<i>SD<sub>z</sub></i>
Success	2.87	1.51	4.76	1.36	2.42	1.65	2.39	1.17	0.01	0.77
Failure	2.56	1.57	4.01	1.15	2.90	1.84	2.20	1.02	0.08	0.70
Control	3.32	1.81	4.40	1.21	2.50	1.80	2.44	1.24	-0.05	0.64

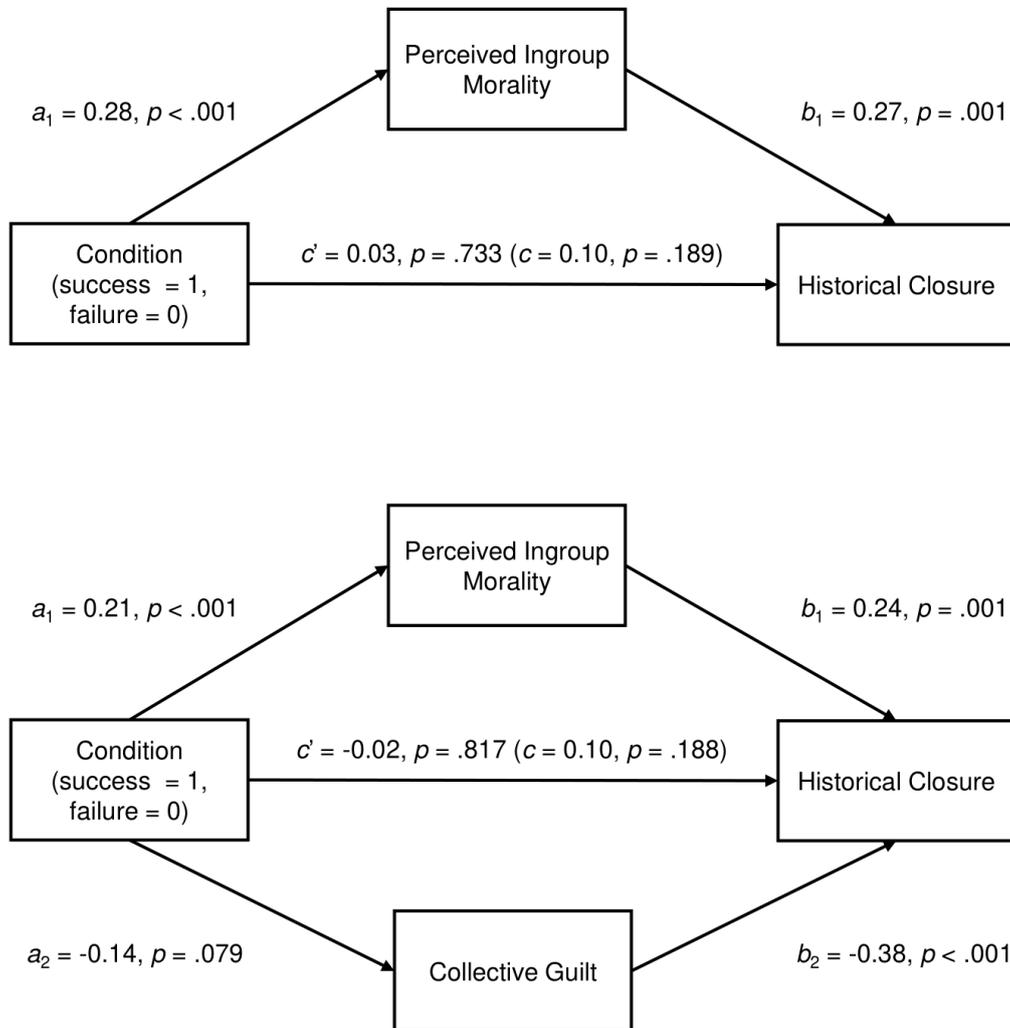
*Note.* Political orientation is reported in z-standardized scores.

**Single and Multiple Step Mediation**

Despite the absence of significant differences between the two experimental groups in historical closure, mediation analyses were still conducted in order to obtain more detailed insights into the data. The indirect effect (5000 bootstrap-resamples) of perceived morality was significant, whether in a simple mediation,  $a_1*b_1 = 0.08$ , 95% CI [0.02, 0.14],  $p = .018$ , or a single step multiple mediation controlling for potential mediation effects of collective guilt,  $a_1*b_1 = 0.07$ , 95% CI [0.02, 0.12],  $p = .013$ . The indirect effect of guilt in the latter model was not significant,  $a_2*b_2 = 0.05$ , 95% CI [-0.01, 0.11],  $p = .099$ . Yet, neither the direct nor the total effect were significant (Figure 5). Hence, ingroup morality and collective guilt both need to be rejected as mediators between success in dealing with the past and demands for historical closure.

**Figure 5**

*Simple and Multiple Mediations of Condition on the Demand for Historical Closure  
(Completely Standardized Solutions)*



Note. Total effects ( $c$ ) in parentheses after the direct effects ( $c'$ ).

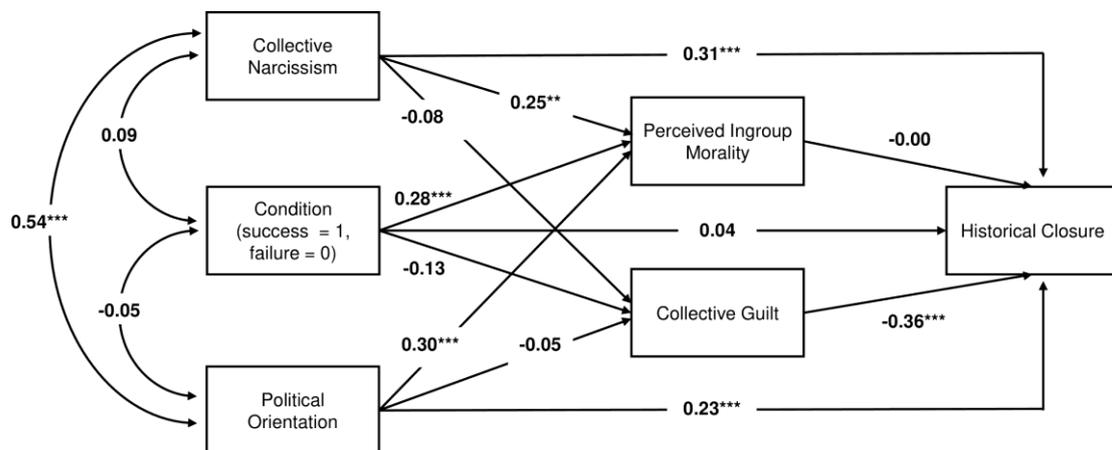
### **Controlling for Political Orientation and Collective Narcissism**

Whether controlling for each of them separately or adding political orientation and collective narcissism simultaneously as additional exogenous predictors of perceived morality, collective guilt and historical closure into the SEM, the pattern of results was similar: political orientation and collective narcissism were significantly related to perceived morality and historical closure, yet neither perceived morality nor condition were significantly associated with historical closure (Figure 6). Accordingly, the previously significant indirect

effect of condition on historical closure via perceived morality faded,  $a_1*b_1 = 0.00$ , 95% CI [-0.04, 0.42],  $p = .997$ , and the total effect of condition on historical closure was also insignificant,  $c = c' + a_1*b_1 + a_2*b_2 = 0.09$ , 95% CI [-0.05, 0.22],  $p = .203$ .

**Figure 6**

*Path Coefficients (Completely Standardized Solution) in the Multiple Mediation When Controlling for Political Orientation and Collective Narcissism*



Note. \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

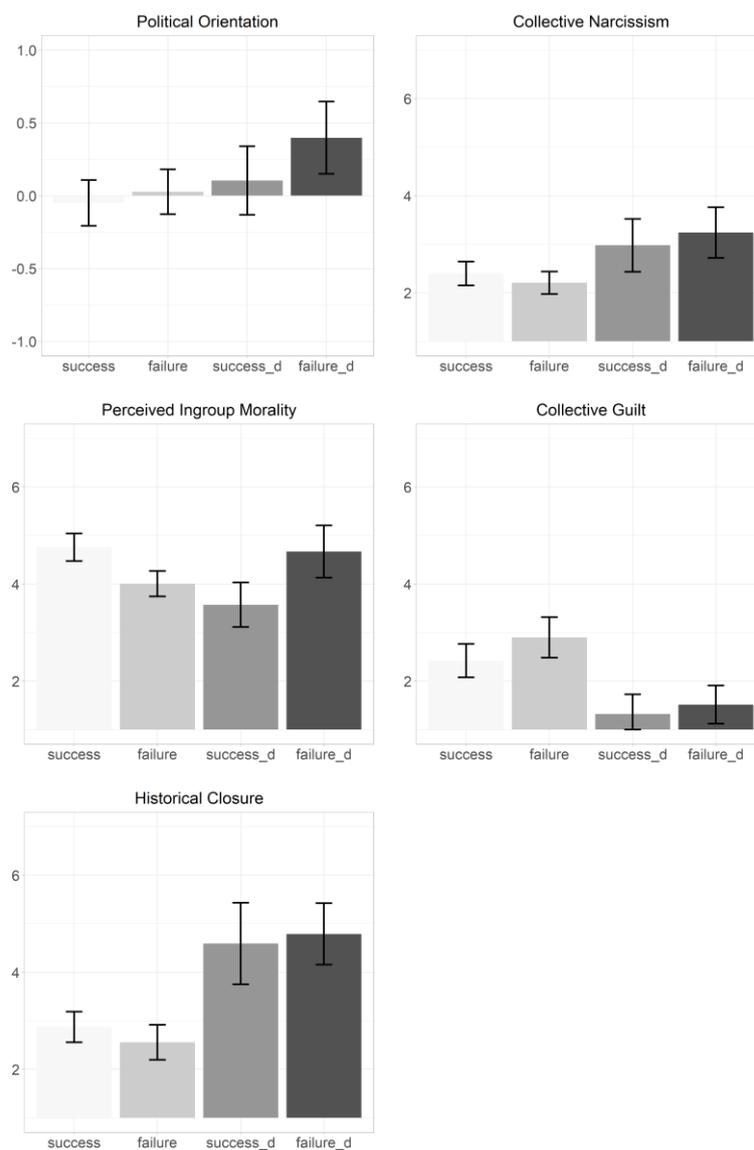
### Additional Analyses of Non-Conforming Participants

An additional logistic regression indicated that with higher levels of collective narcissism, participants were less likely to report examples that matched the opinion in the priming article they had read. Comparisons between the two experimental and the two dropout groups indicated that collective narcissism was significantly higher in the group of participants who dropped out of the failure condition due to non-compliant responses ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) than in the failure experimental group (Figure 7). Political orientation did not differ significantly between groups. Morality was significantly lower in the success dropout group ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ) than in the success experimental group. Also, collective guilt was significantly lower in both dropout groups, success ( $M = 1.32$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) and failure ( $M = 1.51$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ), than in both experimental groups, while the demand for historical closure

was significantly higher in the success ( $M = 4.59$ ,  $SD = 2.27$ ) and failure dropout group ( $M = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ) than in both experimental groups (see Appendix F on OSF for details).

## Figure 7

*Mean Scores and Confidence Intervals for Both Experimental Groups (success and failure) as well as the Groups of Participants Who Gave Non-Compliant Examples and Therefore Dropped out of the Success (success\_d) and Failure Condition (failure\_d)*



## Discussion

Overall, the hypothesized mediation model was not supported, although a significant indirect effect of success on demand for historical closure through perceived ingroup morality

was found, even when controlling for a potential indirect effect through collective guilt. Yet, while the effect of condition on morality remained stable after controlling for political orientation and collective narcissism, perceived morality was no longer significantly associated with historical closure and the indirect effect of morality disappeared. This suggests that perceived ingroup morality and the demand for historical closure are both confounded with political orientation or collective narcissism and their association thus might be spurious (Fiedler et al., 2011).

However, remarkable dropout rates due to non-compliant responses in the priming task eliminated a part of the variance in relevant study variables from the outset. The significant influence of collective narcissism on non-conforming responses suggests that the dropout was not random but systematic. Additional comparisons between the experimental and the dropout groups supported this assumption by revealing a systematic selection bias: Excluded participants in both experimental groups showed significantly higher levels of historical closure and differed in perceived morality, collective narcissism and collective guilt.

We can only speculate about the reasons for these differences. One possibility might be that participants who wanted historical closure from the outset refused to provide examples that matched the priming material they read because they generally did not want to engage with the issue of dealing with the past, either its successful aspects or its shortcomings. One finding that supports this possibility is that demands for historical closure were present in the open-ended responses of both dropout groups. Especially in the failure dropout group with particularly high levels of collective narcissism, the dropout might have been driven by narcissistic defensiveness against an engagement with ingroup-directed criticism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). Yet, it is also possible that several participants just fundamentally disagreed with the opinion expressed in the priming article, which was also reflected in some open-ended responses. Overall, however, the experimental task failed to consistently achieve the intended manipulation. Therefore, the next study used a different manipulation with the aim of reducing the high dropout rates.

## Study 4

It is possible that the dropouts were driven by narcissistic defensiveness or a strong opinion on Germany's capability of dealing with the past that diverged from the opinion expressed in the priming article. In both cases, a manipulation could be beneficial that does not force participants to produce content that deviates from their opinion or criticizes the German ingroup, but rather confronts participants with the dissenting content in a less imposing way. We therefore selected from Study 2 and 3 the most frequently given examples for success and failure (15 examples each) in dealing with the past and presented them as input material for a ranking task. Our pre-registered hypothesis was again that reminders of success (vs. failure) would increase the demand for historical closure, mediated by perceived ingroup morality.

### Method

#### Sample

Based on the same power considerations as in Study 3, a sample of 412 German participants was recruited via the panel service Respondi. In accordance with the pre-registered exclusion criteria, 37 participants were excluded because they indicated belonging to the target groups, stated to have clicked at random or completed the experiment extremely fast according to the MAD criterion with a threshold value of 2.5 (Leys et al., 2013). Another ten participants were excluded, as pre-registered, because they explicitly disagreed with the statements presented in the ranking task in open-text fields below the task. The final sample ( $N = 366$ ,  $n_{success} = 123$ ,  $n_{failure} = 102$ ) included 69% female, 30% male and 1% diverse participants with an age range from 18 to 69 years ( $M = 34.9$  years,  $SD = 13.7$ ).

#### Independent Variable

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the *success* condition, participants were confronted with the 15 most frequently named examples of success in Germany's dealing with the past selected from the previous studies (see Appendix G on OSF). Subsequently, the participants were asked to rank the examples from

the most to the least important achievement. In the *failure* condition, the 15 most frequently named examples of failure were presented and were to be ranked from the greatest to the smallest deficit in Germany's dealing with the past. Participants in the control condition were asked to sort school subjects according to their relevance.

### **Procedure and Measures**

The order of the priming task and measures was similar to that in Study 3, except for minor changes: Demographic variables were assessed at the beginning of the study, a three-item-scale for national identification with Germany was added for exploratory purposes (adapted from Pehrson et al., 2009;  $\alpha = .88$ ), collective narcissism was assessed with a five-items short version of the Collective Narcissism Scale (Golec de Zavala et al. (2009;  $\alpha = .91$ ), and perceived morality was assessed with five items, including the two items used before and three further items (e.g., "Germany is a very sincere country";  $\alpha = .85$ , see Appendix H on OSF for an EFA of morality items). Similar to Study 3, political orientation was calculated by z-standardizing the three RWA items and the political spectrum-item and combining them into a single score ( $\alpha = .71$ ). Except for the political spectrum-item, all items were answered on 7-point Likert scales.

### **Results**

Descriptive analyses are given in Table 3. There were no significant differences between groups in historical closure,  $F(2, 363) = 0.26, p = .775, \eta^2 = .00$ , perceived morality,  $F(2, 363) = 2.15, p = .118, \eta^2 = .01$ , collective guilt,  $F(2, 363) = 0.89, p = .413, \eta^2 = .00$ , collective narcissism,  $F(2, 363) = 0.56, p = .571, \eta^2 = .00$ , or political orientation,  $F(2, 363) = 1.30, p = .274, \eta^2 = .01$ .

**Table 3***Summary of Means and Standard Deviations*

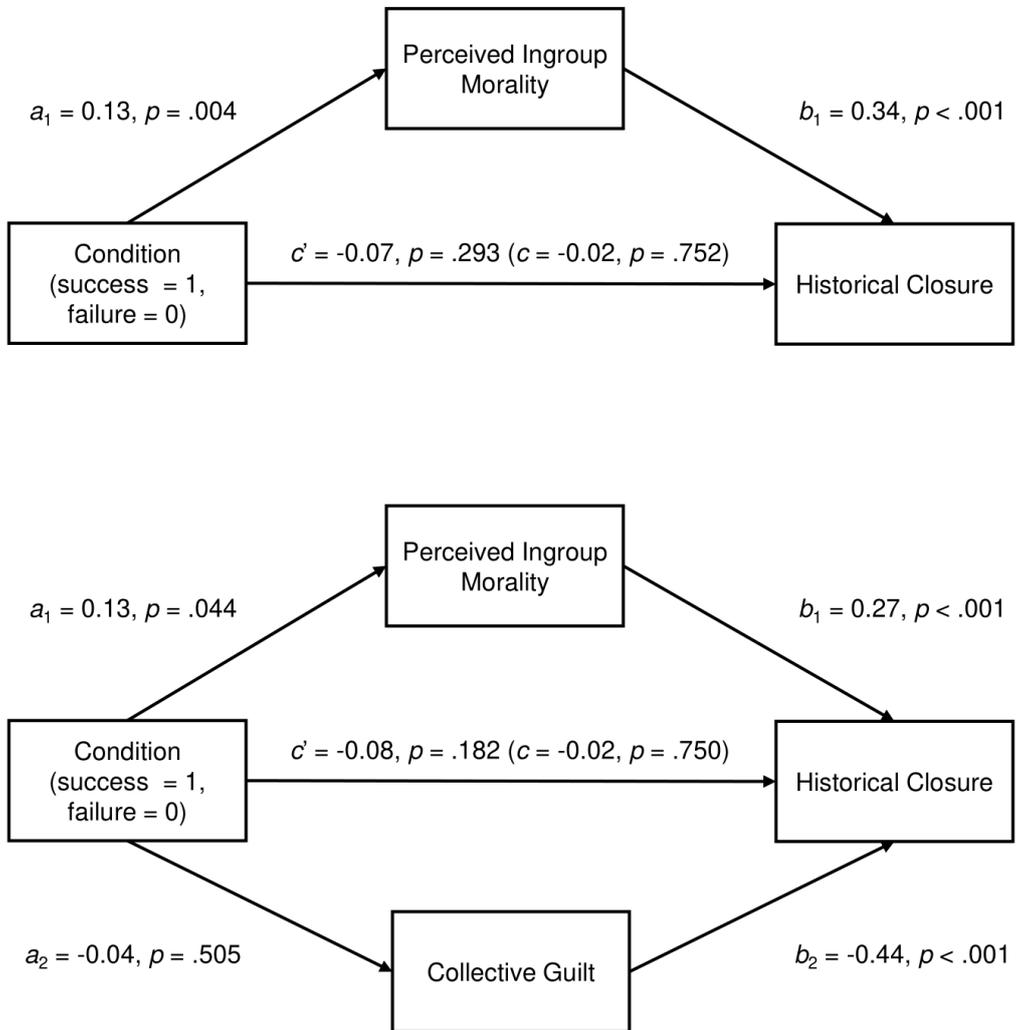
Group	Perceived									
	Historical Closure		Ingroup Morality		Collective Guilt		Collective Narcissism		Political Orientation	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M<sub>z</sub></i>	<i>SD<sub>z</sub></i>
Success	3.96	1.87	4.78	1.15	2.53	1.72	2.95	1.38	-0.05	0.74
Failure	4.04	1.75	4.47	1.11	2.69	1.75	3.14	1.53	0.10	0.75
Control	4.12	1.85	4.69	1.09	2.83	1.88	3.11	1.57	-0.03	0.71

*Note.* Political orientation is reported in z-standardized scores.

Neither the indirect effect (5000 bootstrap-resamples) of collective guilt,  $a_2*b_2 = 0.02$ , 95% CI [-0.04, 0.08],  $p = .519$ , nor of morality were significant, whether in the simple,  $a_1*b_1 = 0.05$ , 95% CI [-0.00, 0.09],  $p = .067$ , or multiple mediation,  $a_1*b_1 = 0.04$ , 95% CI [-0.00, 0.76],  $p = .078$  (Figure 8). When entering political orientation or collective narcissism separately as additional exogenous predictors into the SEM, morality remained significantly associated with desire for historical closure. However, when entering political orientation and collective narcissism simultaneously, the previously significant association between morality and desire for historical closure was reduced to non-significance (Figure 9). Correspondingly, in the latter model, neither the indirect effect via morality,  $a_1*b_1 = 0.01$ , 95% CI [-0.01, 0.04],  $p = .213$ , nor the total effect of condition on historical closure,  $c = c' + a_1*b_1 + a_2*b_2 = 0.04$ , 95% CI [-0.07, 0.14],  $p = .515$ , were significant.

**Figure 8**

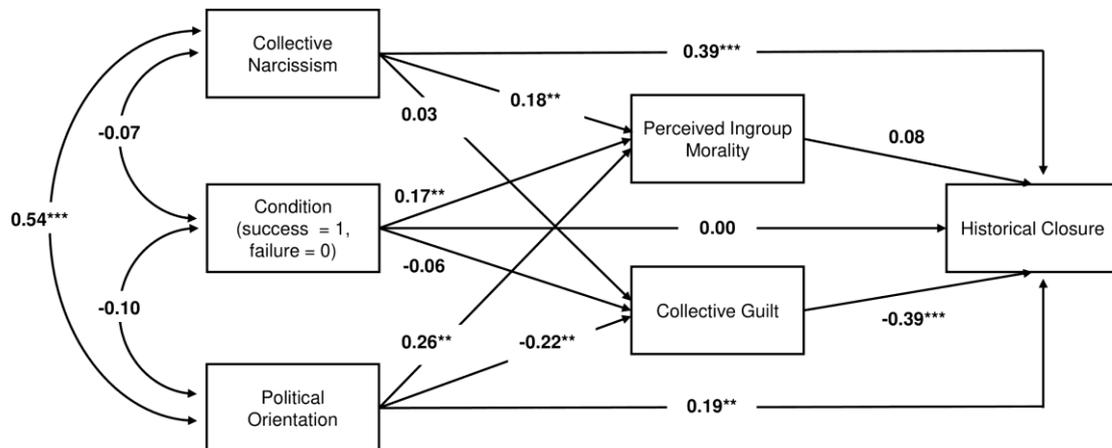
*Simple and Multiple Mediations of Condition on the Demand for Historical Closure  
(Completely Standardized Solutions)*



Note. Total effects (c) in parentheses after the direct effects (c').

**Figure 9**

*Path Coefficients (Completely Standardized Solution) in the Multiple Mediation when Controlling for Political Orientation and Collective Narcissism*



Note. \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

Overall, the weak mean differences between the experimental groups highlight that the ranking task was not able to meaningfully increase or decrease the perceived quality of dealing with the past. Although our goal of reducing the dropout rates was achieved, the less obtrusive manipulation seemed to be at the expense of the manipulation's effectiveness. The reduction of the association between perceived morality and historical closure to non-significance when simultaneously controlling for political orientation and collective narcissism moreover suggests that these control variables might represent confounds between perceived morality and historical closure.

## Meta-Analysis

The results throughout the presented studies showed a rather consistent effect of success in dealing with the past on perceived ingroup morality, but an inconsistency regarding the association between morality and claims for historical closure as well as the

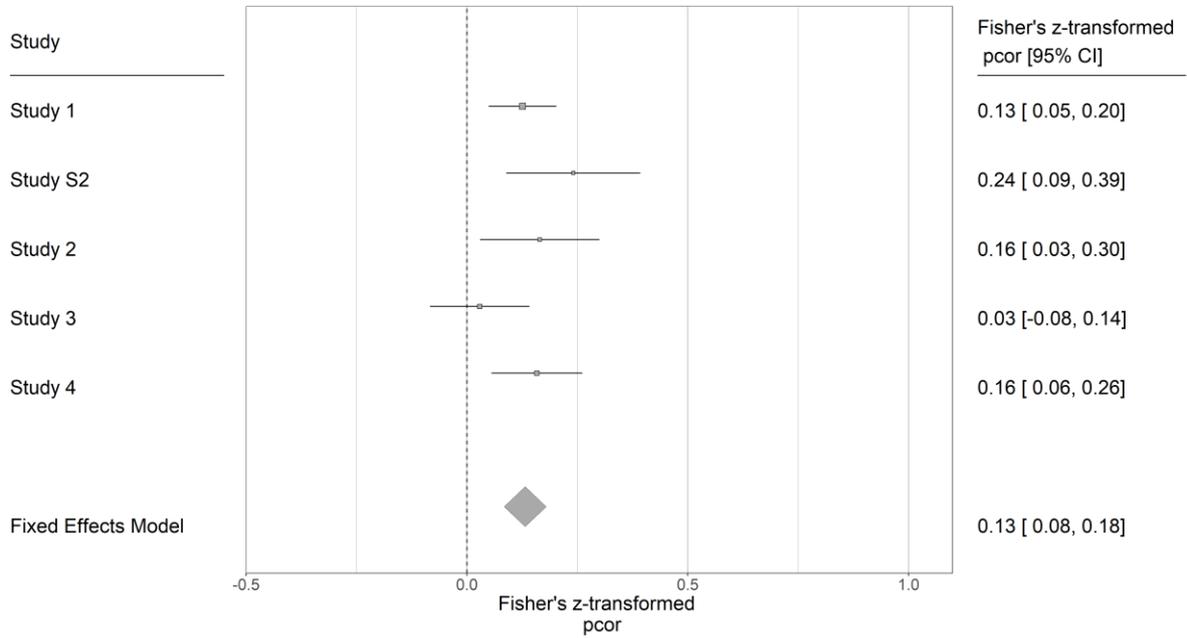
impact of success on demand for historical closure. To determine whether the correlation between morality and historical closure as well as the experimental effect of success (vs. failure) on historical closure were overall significant even when controlling for political orientation, we conducted a series of single study fixed-effects meta-analyses. The first analysis comprised the Fisher's z-transformed partial correlation coefficients of morality and demand for historical closure when accounting for political orientation across all studies that measured political orientation (Study 1-4, Study S2). The second and third analyses included the effect sizes of condition on morality and demand for historical closure across all *experimental studies* (Study S2, Study 2, Study 3 and Study 4). To control for political orientation when calculating these effect sizes, we conducted linear regressions from political orientation on morality or historical closure for each study and used the resulting standardized residuals to calculate the effect sizes of condition on historical closure. This procedure allowed us to determine the group-based differences in perceived ingroup morality and demand for historical closure per study that resulted when accounting for the variance explained by political orientation.

## Results and Discussion

The calculated fixed-effects models (Figure 10-12) indicated a small correlation between morality and historical closure (Fisher's  $z = 0.13$ , 95% CI [0.08, 0.18],  $z = 5.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $Q(4) = 5.70$ ,  $p = .223$ ;  $I^2 = 29.80\%$ ) as well as a significant, medium effect of quality of dealing with the past (success vs. failure) on perceived ingroup morality ( $d = 0.52$ , 95% CI [0.36, 0.69],  $z = 6.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, we found a significant small effect of success in dealing with the past on historical closure ( $d = 0.23$ , 95% CI [0.07, 0.39],  $z = 2.77$ ,  $p = .006$ ). The experimental effects were homogeneous across all four studies for both variables, perceived morality,  $Q(3) = 2.78$ ,  $p = .426$ ;  $I^2 = 0.00\%$ , and historical closure,  $Q(3) = 3.37$ ,  $p = .338$ ;  $I^2 = 11.07\%$ . The meta-analytic results calculated without controlling for political orientation did not differ from the present results in statistical inferences (see Appendix I on OSF for forest and sunset plots).

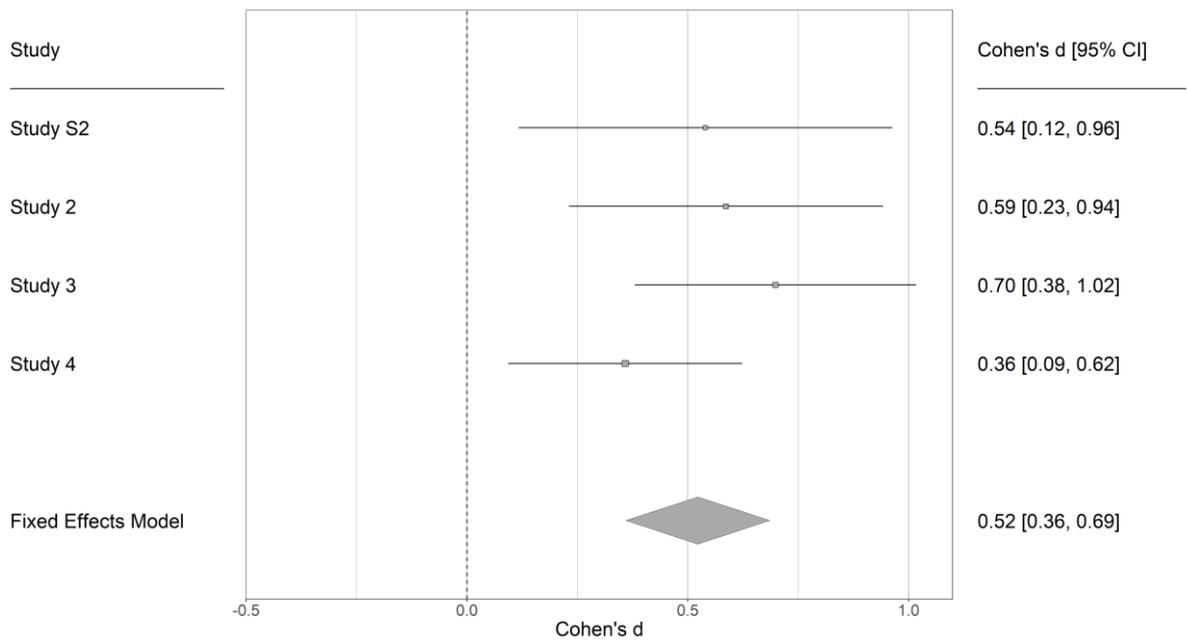
**Figure 10**

*Forest Plots of Fisher's z-transformed Partial Correlation Coefficients Between Perceived Morality and Demand for Historical Closure*



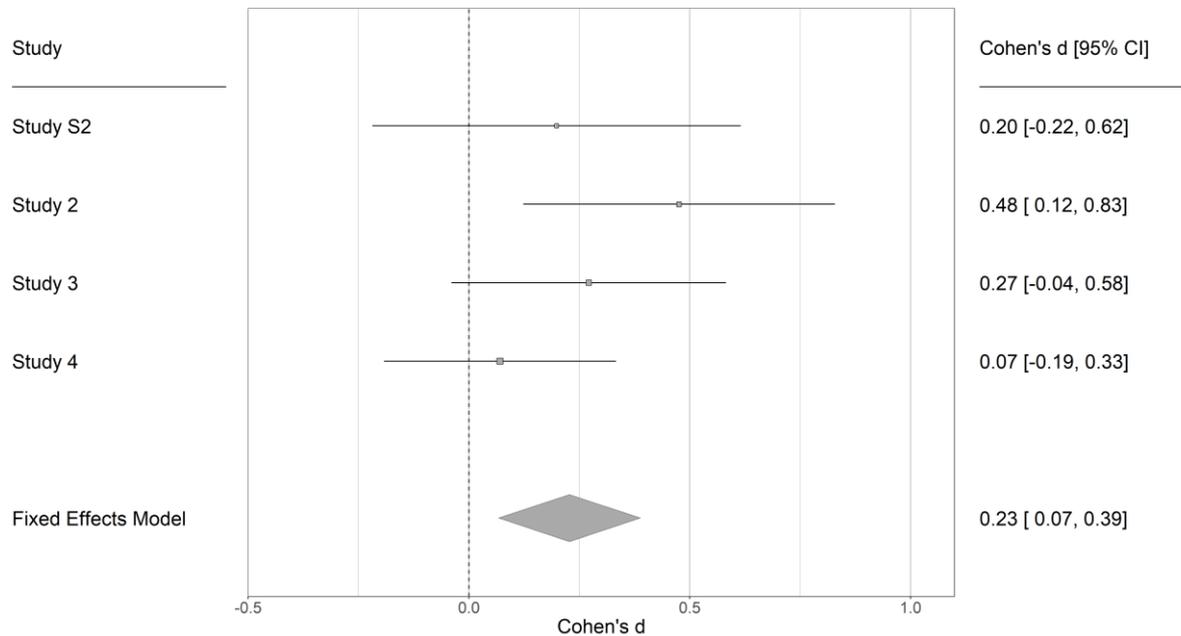
**Figure 11**

*Forest Plots of Success (vs. Failure) in Dealing With the Past on Perceived Morality*



**Figure 12**

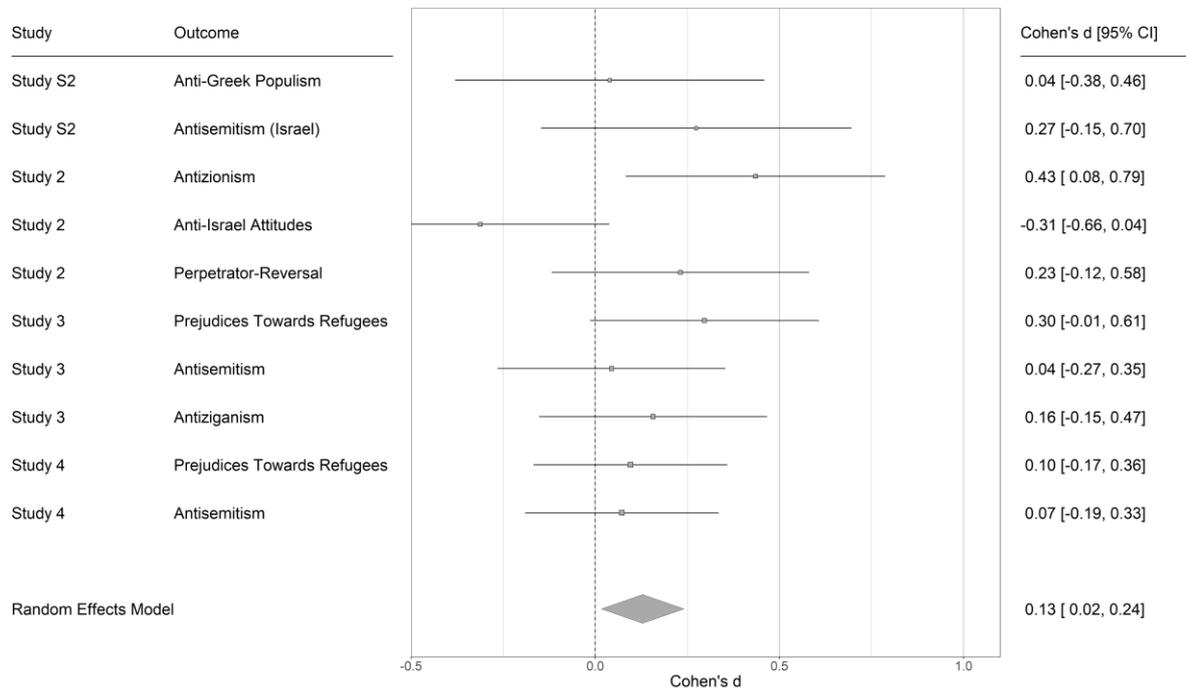
*Forest Plots of Success (vs. Failure) in Dealing With the Past on Demand for Historical Closure*



Throughout the studies reported above, we repeatedly included measures of outgroup negativity to explore whether perceived success in dealing with the past may entitle the expression of negative intergroup attitudes (results reported in the online supplement on OSF). Yet, throughout our studies we did not find support for this idea. A three level meta-analysis (Figure 13) revealed a small significant effect of success in dealing with the past on negative intergroup attitudes ( $d = 0.13$ , 95% CI [0.02, 0.24],  $z = 2.24$ ,  $p = .023$ ) when controlling for political orientation. The overall heterogeneity of the model was not significant,  $Q(9) = 11.64$ ,  $p = .235$ ,  $I^2 = 16.37\%$ , with more heterogeneity between the different types of prejudices measured within each study ( $I^2 = 16.37\%$ ) than between studies ( $I^2 = 0.00\%$ ). However, the effect faded when not controlling for political orientation (Appendix I on OSF), which suggests that the effect is potentially not reliable.

**Figure 13**

*Forest Plot of Success (vs. Failure) in Dealing With the Past on Negative Intergroup Attitudes Within a Multi-Level Random Effects Model*



## General Discussion

The present studies are among the first to empirically demonstrate the possibility of creating a positive self-image for Germans by acknowledging their ancestors' transgressions during the Nazi regime. In a series of correlational and experimental studies, we found robust empirical support for the idea that reminders of success in dealing with the past increase the perceived moral image of the German ingroup compared to indications of failure. Perceived morality, in turn, was meta-analytically associated with more claims for historical closure, even when controlling for political orientation ( $K = 5$ ), although this association was not supported across all individual studies once political orientation and collective narcissism were accounted for. Even though not all our studies thus yielded significant support for our proposed model (significant support for a mediation between success in dealing with the past and demand for historical closure through perceived morality was found only in Study 2), a

final single-study fixed-effects meta-analysis which accounted for the variance explained by political orientation ( $K = 4$ ) revealed a small significant effect of success (vs. failure) in dealing with the past on demand for historical closure. However, given the inconsistencies across studies, the present results should be considered as tentative support for our moral entitlement model.

One reason for the lack of the predicted mediation effect could be the existence of unmeasured suppressor variables with opposing indirect effects, which may have obscured the total effect (Rucker et al., 2011). In our experiments, reminders of Germany's attempts to distance itself from inhumanities of the Nazi past, whether successfully or not, may have activated liberal and egalitarian values cultivated in the German post-war society. As a consequence, the awareness of liberal standards may have suppressed the demonstration of socially undesirable attitudes (Moskowitz & Li, 2011). Likewise, reminders of virtuous conduct in dealing with the past may have activated the moral identity (i.e., the degree to which moral standards are experienced as a crucial part of the overall self-concept; Aquino et al., 2011), which in turn may have decreased the expression of socially undesirable attitudes, such as historical closure.

Since the indirect effect via perceived morality in Study 3 and the associations between perceived morality and historical closure in Studies 3 and 4 disappeared when controlling for political orientation and collective narcissism, another likely explanation is that perceived morality and historical closure were both confounded with these control variables. Especially since only the independent variable but not the mediator was randomized, it seems plausible that potential confounds may have affected the association between the mediator and the dependent variable (Fiedler et al., 2011). Supporting effects in our mediation analyses should therefore be considered compatible, but not conclusive for our model. More strongly in favour of our model, however, are the meta-analytic findings that the association between perceived morality and historical closure as well as the effects of condition on perceived morality and historical closure were significant, even when controlling for political orientation.

## Limitations

A central methodological constraint is the systematic exclusion of variance across the two essay priming experiments. The resulting biased sample could have led to biased inferences about the underlying psychological mechanisms and thus may have undermined external and internal validity. On the one hand, the applied method of essay priming bears the advantage of forcing the participants to engage deeply with the topic of dealing with the past by asking for concrete examples of success or failure from memory. On the other hand, the intended manipulation could not be accomplished with a considerable number of participants, who did not *want* to or *could not* give supporting examples. Open-ended comments included, for example, responses such as "Unfortunately, much less is being done in recent years than 10 years ago, so I do not support this position" (dropout of the success condition) or "I can't think of any examples spontaneously, because in my opinion National Socialism is dealt with enough, both in educational institutions and in the media" (dropout of the failure condition).

This failure to consistently implement the intended manipulation could imply either that (a) the manipulation was still not effective enough to influence participants with a strong personal opinion on that topic, (b) certain individuals were not willing to get involved from the outset, so that the manipulation, regardless of whether it was fundamentally effective or not, could not elicit any changes in their perception of Germany's capability of dealing with the perpetrator past, or (c) the opinion of certain people on that matter was stable and could not be influenced by a manipulation at all. Regarding the last option, it seems particularly relevant to elucidate to what extent attitudes towards history are susceptible to experimental manipulations. As Liu and Khan (2021) argue, historical reminders appear to be embedded in networks of meaning that have built up over time, so that they represent primes of what people already believe rather than exerting an independent causal influence. This may also explain why experimental results in this research area are quite inconsistent. In our research, the essential influence of political orientation and collective narcissism on historical closure suggests that individual differences in group identity and political ideology may play a

substantial role in understanding contemporary attitudes toward the appropriate treatment of the past that our brief manipulation could not override.

## Implications and Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the current studies extend existing research in several ways. In contrast to the wealth of research on the consequences of traumatic perpetrator history itself on collective identity (e.g., Branscombe et al., 2002; Dresler-Hawke & Liu, 2006; Wohl et al., 2006), there is a paucity of empirical studies illuminating the consequences of handling this history. Our results indicate that finding the right path to master the perpetrator past noticeably echoes in the present-day's moral self-understanding. Thus, the present research adds to prior studies suggesting that public apology for injustices can entail a perceived moral high ground of the ingroup (Barlow et al., 2015; Blatz, 2008; Zaiser & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). Moreover, the present research reveals a small effect of success in dealing with the past on the demand for historical closure – a construct that has been analyzed primarily in the light of aversive emotions resulting from the encounter with German Nazi crimes (Adorno, 1963; Rensmann, 2004). Going beyond discussing the desire for historical closure as a defensive reaction to reminders of the Nazi past itself, the present paper allows a first look at the assumption that reminders of efforts to deal with this past may also have an impact on claims for a *Schlussstrich*.

In summary, we found tentative support for our proposed model of moral entitlement: Success in dealing with the past appears to noticeably enhance perceived ingroup morality and slightly increase the demand for historical closure, even when accounting for political orientation. Yet, given the inconsistencies across studies regarding the association of success and morality with historical closure, our results only allow for a cautious interpretation in favor of our model. Considering that the proposed moral entitlement effect is rooted in the generic concepts of moral licensing and psychological standing, which can be found across various contexts (Miller & Effron, 2010), it seems plausible to assume that also in other contexts of historical perpetration, perceived success in dealing with the past may increase perceived ingroup morality and possibly affect the desire to draw a line under the

past. The present research provides first insights from the specific context of Germany, which on the one hand, is regarded by many as the prime example of a historical perpetrator group, but on the other hand has been called "world champion in coming to terms with the past" (Esterházy, as cited in Nijhuis, 2016) for its way of dealing with the Nazi past.

## Funding

The authors have no funding to report.

## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Jonas Knäble and Nina Winands for their support in rating the data.

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<sup>i</sup> Supplemental materials include an additional correlational study (Study S1) examining the shared variance of perceived ingroup morality with related concepts in an automatic stepwise regression, and another experimental study (Study S2), following an identical procedure as Study 2 (see Appendices A and B on OSF). In Study S2, we found a significant effect of condition (success vs. failure) on ingroup morality, which in turn was significantly related to desire for historical closure. The indirect effect via perceived morality was also significant. Yet, the direct and total effects were not significant.

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<sup>ii</sup> We repeated this mediation analysis also in the other studies and found consistent support for a correlational association between perceived ingroup morality and negative attitudes toward refugees via historical closure. Yet, this correlational mediation model was not consistently supported for other types of outgroup negativity. Respective results are reported throughout the online supplement.

<sup>iii</sup> The survey also asked for political orientation in the form of party preference, which was answered by 657 participants. For our meta-analyses, we converted political party preference into numerical values using the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (see also Study 2).

<sup>iv</sup> Additional exploratory analyses indicated that the reported mediation effects were more pronounced for the second morality item than for the former one. Yet, for conceptual reasons and since both items were highly intercorrelated we carried out the mediation analyses with the mean value of both items, as pre-registered.

<sup>v</sup> Diverse represents the third legally recognized option in Germany, besides male and female.

<sup>vi</sup> An EFA revealed that the one negatively coded item from the collective narcissism scale loaded negatively (-.10) on the underlying factor, suggesting that participants may have overlooked its negative formulation. Hence, it was excluded from further calculations.