



Research Paper

Should anyone be ashamed of the nation's history? Should anyone be proud of it?

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Whether a person should be proud or ashamed of his nation's history is contingent primarily on the actual impact of his own actions on national events. Pride and shame are emotions that help us to live in society (Richerson et al., 2012). Although functioning in society is important, it is also vital for individuals to achieve agency and self-confidence. In the event that an individual has not had the opportunity to impact national development, as is predominantly the case with younger members of society, then he should not be obligated to feel either pride or shame. The reason is that he should not feel responsible for the previous national event which he did not shape. Similarly, older people who did not materially affect national history should not be obliged to feel shame or pride.

Although they may work, study, or research in their nation of birth, these individuals are typically not markedly helping or hindering national progress.

This essay argues that impactful people such as politicians, owners of large corporations, and celebrities who tangibly influence national history *should* feel appropriate national pride or shame, dependent on their specific behaviors. If their poor judgements result in negative outcomes, then they should seek to swiftly enact reparations. These high-profile difference-makers should not, however, encourage their countrymen who have not measurably contributed to significant national events, to espouse similar emotions.

Although children and teenagers can work and impact national events before the age of twenty-one, most of them are not, as individuals, particularly impactful on the workforce, economy, or national policy. Salient modern examples such as the teenaged Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg (Caruso, 2025) have become part of the annals of history. Brilliant young people of the past, such as Joan of Arc and Anne Frank (Pettinger, 2014), have also left lasting impressions on human history. These notable figures are the exception, however, rather than the rule. The vast majority of those under twenty-one will not contribute to recorded history in any material manner. As such, individuals under twenty-one should not be held responsible for national developments.

If, however, young people feel a sense of national pride, despite not really contributing tangibly to national progress, it is dangerous because they are especially vulnerable to adopting the viewpoints of a group (Kek, 2022). Sasha Kek (2022) contends that teenagers "want to follow trends and be a part of groupthink." A term coined in the 1970s by an American psychologist Irving Janis, groupthink describes a phenomenon where people suppress dissenting viewpoints to seamlessly fit in with the collective thinking patterns of a group (Sanders, 2025). It is critical that younger individuals are shielded from excessive national pride. In this manner, society can mitigate their blind allegiance to a nationalistic group and enhance the possibility of objective, critical thinking.

What could plausibly happen if those under twenty-one felt national pride despite not having measurably contributed to their country's development? According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, pride has multiple definitions such as "a feeling that you respect yourself and deserve to be respected by others" (Ma, 2015). Self-respect is definitely a healthy facet of pride. On the other hand, as Merriam-Webster Dictionary elaborates, pride also could denote "a feeling that you are more important or better than other people" (Ma, 2015). This feeling of superiority can have negative ramifications. For example, excessive pride often results in unwarranted feelings of entitlement. Comparisons to those deemed inferior can result in an individual believing that he

deserves something more, even if that feeling is baseless (Needham, 2014). For example, younger individuals hailing from first-world nations may believe in their supposed superiority compared with those from developing nations. Acting on these misguided beliefs can engender blatant discrimination, ostracism, and potentially violence (Sanders, 2025). This is especially true because, as demonstrated previously, younger individuals are highly susceptible to peer influence and groupthink.

Thus, heightened levels of national pride and its resultant feelings of entitlement can effectuate social inequality and division. The dynamic research of the Educational Wave Team (2024) indicated that excluding certain social groups can sow deep social divides, much to the detriment of the nation. Young individuals usually follow whatever decision the group decides to make. Since they will not typically go to war or make policy decisions, their impact usually lags behind that of adults.

But it is important that youth not espouse feelings of hate and bias toward others who do not share the same national identity. In future scenarios when youth have more clout and wield greater decision-making authority, they could then leverage established feelings of hatred to effectuate terror on others. In essence, when jingoism is coupled with a strong disdain for people of other nations, xenophobia, racism, and violence could result (Hechter, 1995). As Michael Hechter (1995) notes, countless tragic events throughout history such as the 1993 assassination of Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa, highlight the chaos that typically ensues once “the nationalist chrysalis” (Hechter, 1995) grows to an unsustainable level. Young people are particularly vulnerable to following the crowd, so when they feel national pride, they sometimes act in a discriminatory manner towards other individuals. Potentially such actions could result in horrific outcomes like the Holocaust, which evoke widespread national shame.

Similarly, excessive national shame felt by the young is also suboptimal. In the latter case, being ashamed of your country, can result in strong feelings of anger towards that nation (Cruz, 2018). According to Helen de Cruz (2018), a prime example arose after Brexit whereby many British citizens felt ashamed to be part of Great Britain for various reasons pertinent to Brexit. When shame mounts, it can be so shocking that it threatens an individual's core identity, elevates their risk for developing depression, or creates negative immunological ramifications (Richerson & Henrich, 2012).

The scientific research of Dickerson and Kemeny (2004) showcased how feelings of shame significantly accelerated inflammation, as measured by the elevated levels of cytokine tumor necrosis factor- α (TNF- α) in their participants. Many high-school German students feel this heightened level of TNF- α during discussions of the atrocities of World War II in their history classes; as per the *European Conservative* (2024), German society encourages their children to embrace a “culture of remembrance” whereby they learn about the atrocities of the Holocaust to prevent a similar event from occurring in the future. It is admittedly important to discover the intricacies about national history, acknowledge them, and vow to never repeat the transgressions of the past. That being said, however, current German youth and their parents had nothing to do with implementing or acquiescing to the Holocaust. This paper contends that young Germans should not be subjected to the heavy burden of national shame. Fortunately, many German youth are exhibiting immense courage in rejecting national shame, while acknowledging the shameful parts of Germany's past. Unshackled from the sins of their predecessors, now many young people have reclaimed their own identities.

Normal working-class citizens comprise another subset of people who should not feel obligated to bear the burdens of the past by rejecting national pride and shame. Yes, these individuals should acknowledge their countries' histories, metaphorical wars and all. This includes resisting feeling pride or superiority simply because of the lottery of birth; your birth in a more developed nation such as the United States, Singapore, or Japan was pure luck, so you should feel no national pride associated with this occurrence.

For many, nationality is a central element in their identities. But basking in the glory of the nation when one has not provided significant impact on it will reduce agency and personal accountability; in fact, Raven Lee (2024) believes that these scenarios could potentially violate the fundamental tenets of honesty and integrity. Instead of national pride, another suggestion is to adhere to the wise words of Abraham Lincoln: “I like to see a man live so that his place will be proud of him.” (Basler, 1953) In essence, Lincoln advises that doing good through your own actions should be your primary source of pride.

For adults who do not notably impact national events, national shame is also not obligated or recommended. Instead of feeling bad for actions that are outside of your direct sphere of influence, performing local community service can create healthy feelings of pride. For instance, Country X attacks Country Y, inflicting horrific damage to the infrastructure and killing millions of innocent civilians. A citizen of Country X should not feel

national shame if he did not have a pivotal role in or sanctioned or the destruction. This person should never feel ashamed of his nation since he is most likely powerless to change the nation's future courses of action on a national scale beyond voting for those in office. Instead of feeling shame, this person could donate his time and money towards war relief efforts. He could adopt an orphan of the tragedy. The positive options that he can pursue are endless. A normal citizen must not feel national shame; instead, he should always strive to do good within his own sphere of influence.

Finally, noteworthy individuals who do tangibly affect national developments should experience the accompanying feelings of national pride or shame appropriate to their actions. For events that happened outside of the direct jurisdiction of these decision-makers, there should be no associated feelings of national pride or shame. Should a decision-maker engender positive results, he should feel pride because he accomplished the feat. If this individual creates negative outcomes, after a brief moment of shame, he should redress the situation immediately afterwards.

According to the work of Tomas Bonavia & Josué Brox-Ponce (2018), feelings of shame can galvanize an individual to rectify a wrong. Yet, there is conflicting research. The findings of Lotem Bassan-Nygate & Gadi Heimann (2024) differentiate the concepts of shame and guilt, as "shame is more likely to provoke immature defenses like denial and distortion, while guilt provokes a more mature and reparative reaction." Whether shame or guilt can stimulate positive actions from people with power is up for debate. Irrespective of whether shame or guilt or both are required, influential individuals should feel guilt arising from their harmful actions and immediately attempt to fix the problem. Since these people can create beneficial changes in a relatively short period of time (as with the passing of sweeping legislation or the development of novel technologies), they should operate with ethics and morality and strive to mitigate harmful ramifications.

Throughout this analysis, it is clear that personal agency is of paramount importance. Taking full accountability for one's actions is critical to feeling self-confidence and to leading a life of purpose. That being said, however, holding oneself responsible for the actions of others, especially those who lived in the distant past, is not obligatory, nor is it productive. As younger individuals are particularly susceptible to peer influence and groupthink, we should insulate them from feelings of national pride and national shame. A myriad of negative consequences is possible if they feel these emotions, ranging from loss of identity to hatred of foreigners to ethnic cleansing. For adults without major influence, they can do good in their lives, improving their self-esteem levels and moving them closer to purpose-driven lives. This paper concludes that only those few key individuals who are critically important to national history should feel prideful or ashamed for their direct roles in their respective nations' developmental arcs. In the latter scenario, these leaders should operate with an ethical ethos to actively solve the conundrums that their previous decisions created.

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