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Identifying stories of 'us': A mixed-method analysis of the meaning, contents and associations of national narratives constructed by Americans

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Abstract

How do lay individuals reconstruct, appropriate or resist culturally sanctioned narratives about their nation's past? The current study examined this question through an open-ended survey administered to a US sample, stratified by age and gender (N = 399). We identified three major historical narratives that were popular among Americans. Specifically, we identified positive narratives of the nation's *progress* over time and *glorifying* narratives of American exceptionalism, alongside a popular counter-narrative that was *critical* of the nation as reproducing ongoing cycles of injustice. Representations of national origins were significantly more salient for the narratives of Progress and Glorification, while more recent and lived events were salient for Critical narratives. Progress and Critical narratives were both associated with a constructive orientation to national identity, while Glorifying narratives were associated with blind patriotism. Critical and Glorifying narratives were consistently opposed in their associated political attitudes and in their patterns of endorsement across party affiliations. Overall, it appeared that narratives of progress were most popular and least polarised. We discuss the implications of these findings through the perspective that narratives provide dynamic content for identity construction as well as the means for articulating resistance to hegemony within specific historical and political contexts.

KEYWORDS
historical narratives, mixed-method analysis, national identity, social representations of history, system justification

1 | INTRODUCTION

Groups that aspire to immortality, such as nations, survive as distinct collectives insofar as people share meaningful representations of a common and continuous past. Political elites and state institutions curate coherent narratives about a nation's shared past in efforts to bolster identification with the state (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992; Olick & Robbins, 1998). However, there is still much to uncover on how these narratives are actually expressed or resisted by ordinary people from the ground up. Do individuals resonate with shared narratives about the nation's past? Through a mixed-method analysis of open-ended responses, we systematically assess the content and meaning of historical narratives currently shared among ordinary people in the United States and examine how they are associated with markers of national identity and political attitudes.

A significant development in social identity/self-categorisation theory (SCT; Turner et al., 1987) was marked through the revelation that *content* is a central moderator to the processes and implications of ingroup identification (Elcheroth et al., 2011). Identity content is what makes a group meaningful for individuals, by providing a common group definition for its members (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Constructing a shared past also provides the foundations for 'imagining' the collective as a distinct entity that endures and is connected through generational time (Assmann, 2013; Hammack, 2011). In other words, historical narratives fulfil important epistemic needs (Abrams & Hogg, 2001), including the need to know where the nation came from and how it has dealt with crises over time (Ashmore et al., 2004). In this way, they may operate as *charters* for a group by reifying an official story of national origins ('where we come from') to justify specific actions and arrangements in the present ('the way things are') and uphold certain aspirations going forward ('where we are going'), (Liu & Hilton, 2005).

The current study examines the ways that events (or historical representations) are selected and woven together in service of an *overarching group narrative* (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Under the constraints of narrative, certain events are selectively incorporated and remembered in continuity, while others are omitted and forgotten (Rigney, 2005). Such narrative principles of subjectivity and selectivity (Lowenthal, 1985) are what endow historical representations with meaning 'over and above the "bare facts" of history' (Liu & László, 2007, p. 87).

Interdisciplinary research has provided important insights about how such national narratives are curated and promoted from the top down (Olick & Robbins, 1998). These include cultural products like historical monuments, exhibits and texts, as well as memorial practices like commemorations (Assmann, 2013). History education in schools provide a particularly powerful means of socialising individuals to a nationalistic account of the past (Carretero et al., 2013). These practices tend to promote a morally just image of the ingroup, whether that be as a victim, martyr or hero, which requires the denial or downplaying of shameful, unjust acts committed by the ingroup in the past (see Blight, 2002; Kurtiş et al., 2017).

Importantly, this cultural production only forms one side of the picture. The realisation of a group charter as an expression of collective identity ought to be determined by the extent to which *individuals* believe and resonate with the narratives that they are exposed to. In other words, it is important to recognise the mnemonic agency of individuals to collaborate and engage with the historical narratives that are offered to them (Kansteiner, 2002; Soroka & Krawatzek, 2021). As such, Liu and László (2007) acknowledged the need to measure individual differences in the extent to which people resonate with national narratives as a key mediator to narrative impact (see also Klar & Baram, 2016).

1.1 | Pathways for narrative continuity

Unsurprisingly, much of psychological research to date has shown that individuals' knowledge and interpretation of historical events tend to be driven by needs to defend a continuous (Jetten & Wohl, 2012; Sani et al., 2009; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2014) and positive image of their group (Bilewicz et al., 2017; Sahdra & Ross, 2007; Roth et al., 2017) leading to denial, minimisation or reappraisal of the ingroup's historical misdeeds (Kurtiş et al., 2010; Sibley et al., 2005). This tends to be mediated by desires to avoid negative group-based emotions like shame and guilt (Doosje et al., 1998; Dresler-Hawke & Liu, 2006) and become heightened with perceptions of intergroup threat (Smeekes et al., 2017). Cross-national studies on representations of world history have also shown general trends for ethnocentrism (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2005). In these ways, individual-level historical biases seem to align with cultural constructions of history. However, there is still a gap in understanding how individuals *narratively* make sense of, justify and reproduce these attitudes and biases.

1.2 | Pathways for narrative change and plurality

In contrast to the studies mentioned above, research has also demonstrated potential for bottom-up *change* (rather than continuity) in historical representations. Communicative memories (memories of public events that have occurred within the lifetimes of individuals alive today; Assmann, 2013) provide sites for *new* historical representations to emerge through spontaneous social sharing between individuals. Memories of more recent historical events that are kept alive by communication rather than official commemoration may provide content for alternative narratives to proliferate, that do not conform to existing canonical narratives. In line with these ideas, research has shown instances of inter-generational change in historical attitudes (e.g. Licata & Klein, 2010; Rimé et al., 2015). Therefore, while it is in the best interests of a nation-building project for individuals to converge on a shared narrative about the past, a unanimous narrative of history may be unrealistic. It is likely that there are multiple historical narratives across a given society that are diverse in their points of view.

Counter-narratives often emerge to challenge culturally sanctioned narratives. These are typically anchored by experiences of minority or disadvantaged groups, leading to active resistance and contestation (Freel & Bilali, 2022). For example, pan-African narratives have emerged to challenge Eurocentric representations of history and support decolonisation/liberation movements in African nations (Cabecinhas & Feijo´, 2010). Local narratives based on collective struggle have similarly been identified across a range of other contexts (Eyerman, 2001; Hammack, 2011; Liu et al., 1999).

Although it is well-established that ingroup-serving narratives are motivated and maintained by social identity concerns, there is less known about what may drive endorsement of these counter-narratives, especially among *majority* group members. The literature on critical consciousness (Freire, 1973) and communicative remembering (Assmann, 2013) suggests that historical events directly experienced and remembered by individuals and their communities, can provide opportunities for perceiving inconsistencies in the status quo (Pratto et al., 2013) and for making connections between events to

understand how long-term social/structural processes are connected to the present (Watts et al., 2011).

On a macro-level, archival research conducted by Schwartz has demonstrated change in cultural representations of historical events such as the American Civil War. A reframing of the Civil War as a source of heroic inspiration for America's participation in World War II worked to legitimise US state interests during the world war period (Schwartz, 1996). By contrast, representations of the Civil War and Abraham Lincoln were revised and appropriated by activists during the Civil Rights era to mobilise for social change and defy the state's interests (Schwartz, 1997). This pairing or 'keying' between past and present contexts shifts the field of meaning and values that are associated with representations of the past. Although this has been documented on a macro-level across grand scales of time, there is a gap in understanding the potential for change and divergence within collective remembering that occurs on a *psychological* or individual level.

1.3 | The present context

National contestation about history has become widespread in the United States, manifesting in intense debates and protests about the removal of confederate statues and the renaming of Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day (Liu, 2022; Roediger & Wertsch, 2002). Reflecting this, studies have found individual differences in interpretations of national atrocities such as slavery and Native American genocide, depending on how strongly Americans identify with their nation (Eason et al., 2021; Kurtiş et al., 2010; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). There are also differences in historical representations that have been documented between White and African-American students (Epstein, 2000; Griffin & Hargis, 2008) as well as inter-generationally (Zaromb et al., 2014).

It is worth investigating the narrative landscape in this context given such a climate of contestation. Among the most dominant narratives in Americans' self-understanding (that has been observed in political rhetoric) is a progressive temporality between past, present and future (Wertsch, 2021). This is a narrative about America as 'a nation moving steadily forward and upward as each generation undertakes its own efforts to perfect the union' (Simko, 2022, p. 72). As a dominant theme in US discourse, myths of progress work to minimise present-day injustices by emphasising and celebrating social achievements (Alridge, 2006; Loewen, 2008). Even more state favouring rhetoric has been observed in right-leaning discourse where nostalgic narratives emphasise *past greatness*, framing the original 'American experiment' as a universal model that should serve as aspiration for the rest of the world (Simko, 2022). This echoes the well-known expressions of America as a 'city on a hill' and historical justifications for ideas like 'Manifest Destiny' (Lowenthal, 1985).

Counter to the above, Simko (2022) also observed a *traumatic* temporality of narrative that is organised around ongoing cycles of racial violence and oppression in the United States. Key to this is the message that 'slavery did not end in 1865, but rather, evolved' (p. 79). Myths of progress or past exceptionalism are challenged by drawing explicit connections between past and present injustice (e.g. Alexander, 2012). For example, black history education in schools where African-American students were the majority emphasised structural barriers that continue to be faced by their communities, whereas schools where White students were the majority placed much greater emphasis on progressive themes such as individual achievements and the celebration of diversity (Salter & Adams, 2016). The present study will examine whether *individuals*, as members of a national community, actively apply such narrative frameworks as 'mental habits' (Wertsch, 2021) to make sense of their nation's past.

Beyond this general historical context, the specific circumstances unfolding in recent times also have important implications feeding into the political climate (Choi et al., 2023). Specifically, the events of the Afghanistan withdrawal and 20th year commemoration of 9/11 were salient in news media at the time of data collection. There were also the events of the Capitol insurrection earlier in the year, and the mass protests of the Black Lives Matter movement in the previous year, all of which occurred within the wider context of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Being anchored in a present-day climate that is characterised by such polarisation and unrest may influence the kind of narratives that Americans resonate with. Other than the commemoration of 9/11, the events listed above signal some level of collective discontent with institutions. Hence, it would be worth examining: (1) whether these events are saliently recalled in the repertoire of important historical events and (2) whether such lived events are barriers for constructing positive narratives about the country. Given our theoretical interests in the potential for *change* and plurality in identity content (e.g. through the emergence of counter-narratives), it is important to consider how this may be influenced by the current climate and context.

1.4 | The present study

What is the 'story of the making of the ingroup' (Liu et al., 1999) that provides the content for national identification and aspiration among Americans? We attempt to empirically identify these narratives, and map patterns of their prevalence. This provides an important step in developing contextualised measures of ingroup narratives as a necessary complement to measures of ingroup identification. Second, what are the *alternative* stories that challenge or diverge from the dominant national narrative? In particular, we will explore how counter-narratives are related with living memories. Thus, the second contribution of this study is to identify a pathway of communicative remembering (Assmann, 2013) that connects historical narratives to the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1973).

This last point is particularly important for understanding how dominant narratives may be challenged and even *changed* from the bottom-up (Smeekes et al., 2017). To bring these points together, the current investigation aims to highlight the tension between *continuity* of identity content and meaning on one hand, versus tendencies for *change* and pluralisation on the other. Although much has been studied about the former (e.g. Sahdra & Ross, 2007; Sani et al., 2009), we believe that there is room for new contributions regarding the latter,

as this is central for theoretically advancing social identity under a *dynamic* framework that recognises the narrative agency of individuals (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Reicher & Haslam, 2013).

Taking an open-ended approach, the current investigation focuses on historical narratives as actively constructed by individuals in their own words. This minimises the effects of 'leading' respondents with closed-ended scales and more closely captures people's vicarious participation in co-constructing national narratives (Liu & László, 2007), while providing room to spontaneously exercise narrative creativity. By asking people to list historical *events* alongside their narratives, we will further examine how historical representations are mobilised in service of an overarching narrative.

The identified narratives will then be mapped across political party affiliations and ethnicity to get a snapshot of the group-based narrative landscape. To examine whether certain narratives provide content for American identity, we will also examine associations of narratives with existing measures of national identification. In acknowledgement of identity as a multifaceted concept, we will look at narrative associations with both constructive and blind (Schatz et al., 1999) orientations to national attachment, along with a generalised measure of national identity. Although 'blind patriots' or 'glorifiers' have been characterised by ingroup conformity, an unwillingness to criticise the ingroup, and more antagonistic attitudes toward outgroups, 'constructive patriots' have been associated with a greater willingness to criticise the ingroup, which comes with a greater openness to change (Penic et al., 2016). Thus, national narratives may have varying implications depending on what mode of identification they are associated with. Finally, we will provide an overview of how the narratives are associated with other relevant political attitudes in the present. Although the current study cannot show causal implications of the identified narratives, our work does highlight ways in which narratives are complementary with certain identities, political attitudes and beliefs. As the goals of this investigation are to explore historical narratives as meaningful, contextualised content for collective identity, we take an inductive, descriptive and open-ended approach as a necessary first step in this endeavour.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants and procedure

A total of 399 anonymous participants were recruited from the United States stratified by age and gender, through the online panel provider Prolific. Forty nine percent of the sample identified as female and the age of participants ranged from 18 to 83 ($M = 44.7$, $SD = 16.2$). The sample was 70% White, 14% Black, 9% Asian, 4% Latin American, with the rest identifying as other ethnicities. Data for the current study were drawn from a wider survey on attitudes and beliefs about history, politics and current events in America (the full list of items are presented in the Supporting Information). The Qualtrics survey was posted on Prolific from 26 to 29 September 2021 and took approximately 20 min to complete.

2.2 | Measures

2.2.1 | Historical events and narrative

First, participants were asked to 'list up to four historical events that all Americans should remember, and briefly explain why Americans should remember those events'. The wording of this open-ended question (revised from Yamashiro & Roediger, 2019) probed for historical content that participants view to be normative. As cultural signifiers of knowledge, commonly nominated events should provide insight on historical representations that are most salient for incorporating within an ingroup narrative. For each event that was nominated, participants were also asked: 'How positively or negatively do you feel about this event?' on scales ranging from 1 = *very negative* to 7 = *very positive*.

Participants were then asked to indicate their agreement to the question: 'Thinking about the four events that you nominated, do you think they go together to form any meaningful narrative?' followed by an open-ended question: 'If yes, could you briefly describe this narrative and what it means to you?'. There was a 'back' button available so that participants were allowed to modify the historical events that they entered in the previous question. Through this procedure, we attempted to capture participants' deliberate attempts at producing a coherent narrative, even if it meant changing some of the events that initially came to mind. These open-ended items were presented in the beginning of the survey to ensure that effects of response fatigue were minimised. The rest of the measures included in the current analyses were presented in the order below. We note that responses to these items, especially identity, could have been influenced by those open-ended reminders about history in the beginning of the survey.

2.2.2 | Anti-war attitudes

To measure anti-war attitudes, participants were asked to indicate their agreement to the statements: 'I feel bad that America has been involved in so many wars in the last 50 years' and 'I feel worried that America may be involved in more wars in the future', with responses ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

2.2.3 | National identity

National identification was measured through a brief three-item measure (Glasford et al., 2009): 'I am proud to be an American', 'Being an American is an important part of my identity' and 'I feel very close to other Americans' ($\alpha = .875$). Responses ranged on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

2.2.4 | Blind patriotism

To measure more specific dimensions of national attachment, we measured blind patriotism through four items derived from a measure

developed by Schatz and colleagues (1999): 'I would support my country right or wrong', 'I believe that American policies are almost always the morally correct ones', 'I support American policies for the very reason that they are the policies of my country', 'There is too much criticism of America in the world and we its citizens should not criticize it' ($\alpha = .91$). Responses ranged on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

2.2.5 | Constructive patriotism

Next, we measured constructive patriotism as another major aspect of national identification through four items derived from Schatz et al. (1999): 'If you love America, you should notice its problems and work to correct them', 'If I criticize America, I do so out of love for my country', 'I oppose some American policies because I care about my country and want to improve it', 'I express my love for America by supporting efforts at positive change' ($\alpha = .801$). Responses ranged on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

2.2.6 | 9/11 Justification

To assess willingness to justify America's military response to 9/11, participants were asked to indicate their agreement to the statements: 'America was right to invade Afghanistan after 9—11' and 'The actions that America took after 9/11 have made the world safer from terrorism', with responses ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

2.2.7 | 4th of July commemoration

Participation in the national 4th of July commemorations was measured through the items: 'How often have you participated in 4th of July commemorations in the past?' and 'How likely are you to participate in 4th of July commemorations next year?', with responses ranging from 1 = *very unlikely* to 7 = *very likely*, along with 'How positively or negatively do you feel about 4th of July commemorations and celebrations?', with responses ranging from 1 = *extremely negative* to 7 = *extremely positive*, ($\alpha = .841$).

2.2.8 | Voting

To measure voting frequency, participants were asked how often they vote: 'In local or state-wide elections' and 'In national or presidential elections', with responses ranging from 1 = *never* to 7 = *always*.

2.2.9 | Demographics

Political orientation was measured on a 7-point scale that asked: 'On political issues, where would you place yourself?', with responses ranging from 1 = *far right* to 7 = *far left*. Mean political orientation was to the left of mid-point for the overall sample (M = 4.6, *SD* = 1.69). Partisan affiliations were identified by asking: 'If a national election was being conducted now, which political party would you vote for?'. This revealed that the sample had 20% Republicans, 54% Democrats and 16% Independents based on current voting intentions. Perceived social status was measured on a 10-point scale by asking: 'On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being people who are the most well off in society, and 1 being the people that are least well off, where would you describe your position?'. Mean self-reported social status was 5.64 (*SD* = 1.78) for the overall sample. Finally, level of education was assessed through the item: 'What is the highest level of education you have completed?'. Highest level of education in the sample was 0.5% middle school, 10.5% high school, 27.6% College, 36.3% Bachelor's degree and 25.1% Graduate school or higher.

2.3 | Analysis

2.3.1 | Content analysis of historical events

Responses on historical events were coded through a content analysis. Each *event* (from up to four events provided by each participant) provided the unit of analysis for coding. The first level of coding involved identifying whether each event could be classified as a historical event or not. Publicly shared events that have occurred in the past or are ongoing in the present were coded as a valid response (e.g. Choi et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2005). This revealed that 95.2% of all responses constituted actual historical events, with the remaining being identified as either non-historical (e.g. personal life events, religious events) or blank/non-sensical responses. The second level involved identifying the historical event that was described and assigning a unique code to each event. These ranged from general (e.g. World War II) to more specific events (e.g. Bombing of Pearl Harbor). Similar to the heuristic developed by Yamashiro et al. (2022), we coded a specific event under its own category if more than five participants mentioned it. If less than five participants mentioned an event, it was grouped into the relevant general-level category or not assigned an event code. The resulting coding guide consisted of unique codes for 53 events.

2.3.2 | Thematic analysis of historical narratives

Given the higher complexity of the narrative responses, a thematic analysis (TA) was conducted on these data (see Braun & Clarke, 2021 for an overview of different TA approaches). TA was chosen as the overarching framework because we judged that this would provide the most direct analysis for interpreting the central meaning of the narratives. The current analysis takes a *codebook* approach to TA (Boyatzis, 1998) given the specificity of our research questions and the nature of our data, which consisted of responses to a very particular survey prompt (rather than open-ended conversation). Given recommendations that such an orientation to content should be supported by

rigorous coding techniques, we closely followed guidelines for applying coding procedures in a structured and systematic way (Syed & Nelson, 2015).

At the first step of our analysis, we familiarised ourselves with the data through careful and repeated rounds of reading of the entire dataset. Alongside reviewing of data, the first author began developing a dynamic, working coding manual. In the early stages of developing the coding manual, responses were inductively categorised based on similarities and differences in content, guided by repetition and recurrence (Owen, 1984) of words, phrases and topics. We then further (re)categorised these through a deductive process, looking for patterns guided by the observations of Simko (2022) and Wertsch (2021) about progressivism and nostalgia as popular themes in the country's rhetoric. This process was further anchored in more general theories about collective remembering that ingroup narratives with *positive foundations* (Liu & Hilton, 2005) and *historical and/or cultural continuity over time* (Sani et al., 2009) tend to be most readily salient. Points of overlap and difference between these initial coding categories were discussed in depth between the first and second authors throughout this process. An exhaustive list of codes began to take form, consisting of specific inclusion and exclusion rules based on content. Then, we began an iterative process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of applying the identified codes *back* to the original data and combining closely related codes into wider coding families (Campbell et al. 2021), which were more broadly encompassing while retaining internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Detailed descriptions as well as examples (and negative examples) for each distinct code were then added to the coding manual (see https://osf.io/buafw/?view_only=14166057a5cb489a95ef5b5ec18fbc63). Using this, each response was coded by the first author into one to two thematic categories, thus themes were not mutually exclusive. A limit of two codes per narrative was set in attempts to strike a balance between dealing with ambiguous responses (that may mention more than one theme) with the aim to prioritise the main, central point of meaning that was communicated in each response.

At the next step, we trained a coder who was blind to the research aims and design and who had no specialised knowledge of American history. The coding manual was discussed extensively with the coder, and we provided a randomly drawn sample of data on which they could practice applying the coding manual. Once the coder indicated their understanding of its application, we assigned a further randomly drawn sample of data (30% of the dataset excluding blank entries) for coding.[1] There was a moderate level of agreement (see Altman, 1990; Landis & Koch, 1977) between coders for categorising the narratives, $\kappa = .61$ ($p < .001$). Differences were resolved through discussion.

[1] Lilgendahl and McAdams (2011) recommended 20% of the dataset to be coded by the reliability coder.

TABLE 1 Frequencies of top historical events.

Event	Counts	%
9/11	237	59.4
Civil War	119	29.8
Independence	101	25.3
WWII	65	16.3
Pearl Harbour	56	14.0
Moon Landing	55	13.8
Civil Rights Movement	53	13.3
Revolutionary War	52	13.0
Obama election	47	11.8
Capitol insurrection	43	10.8
Vietnam War	42	10.5
Covid-19	42	10.5
Total Sample (N)	399	

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Content analysis of historical events

Through the content analysis, we identified overall counts of historical events that were nominated. Table 1 shows distinct events that were nominated by at least 10% of the sample. Of these, only 9/11 satisfied the criteria for popular consensus as an important historical event (by being nominated by more than 50% of the sample, see Zaromb et al., 2014).

The average emotional valence associated with events was slightly below mid-point overall, leaning towards negativity ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 2.56$). Furthermore, when the emotional valence of the most salient events were tracked in chronological order (see Figure 1), we observed a recurrent rise and fall pattern in emotional evaluation over time. Through our TA, we examined how participants subjectively made sense of these events through the construction of different narratives.

3.2 | Thematic analysis of historical narratives

Through our codebook TA, we identified ten unique categories of narrative themes. Of these, there were three that appeared to be the most widely shared among participants (see Table 2). To develop a more in-depth analysis, the current results will focus and elaborate on the meaning of these three main narratives that showed both rich content and considerable popularity. A description of all other narrative categories can be found in the full coding manual (see the Supporting Information and Table S1 for example extracts). Given that these categories were not mutually exclusive, there were some co-occurrences between narrative themes. However, it was still more common for narrative responses to be assigned one primary theme, as shown in Table 3. These counts suggest that Progress narratives are complementary with both Glorifying and Critical interpretations of the past.

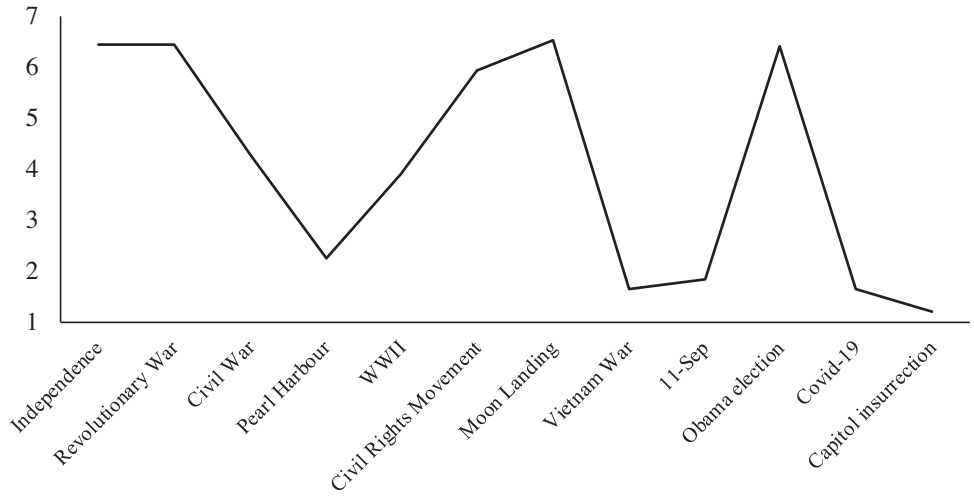

FIGURE 1 Mean valence of popular events in chronological order.

TABLE 2 Frequencies of narrative categories and mean valence and dates of their associated events.

	N	Overall % (N = 399)	Relative % (N = 278)	Event valence M (*SD*)	Event date M (*SD*)
Progress over time	66	16.5	23.7	4.38 (2.61)	1915 (93.5)
Critical	56	14	20.1	2.4 (2.17)	1946 (87.8)
Glorifying	52	13	18.7	4.61 (2.56)	1894 (115.6)
Conflict	26	6.5	9.4	2.87 (2.21)	1939 (76.2)
Decline over time	21	5.3	7.6	2.9 (2.62)	1928 (242.1)
Critical progress	18	4.5	6.5	3.9 (2.69)	1918 (140.7)
Trauma	15	3.8	5.4	2.77 (2.3)	1950 (68.3)
General national significance	15	3.8	5.4	4.53 (2.62)	1940 (87.2)
Equality	14	3.5	5	4.18 (2.78)	1914 (125.6)
Unity	13	3.3	4.7	3.94 (2.59)	1944 (78.5)

Note: The relative column refers to the percentage of narrative nominations out of only those participants who agreed that their list of historical events formed a coherent narrative; Descriptives of valence and dates and their relevant analyses are based on averages derived from event nominations (N = 1598) rather than participants (N = 399).

TABLE 3 Frequencies of main narratives as co-occurring and solo categories.

	N
Progress × Glorifying	10
Progress × Critical	18
Glorifying × Critical	0
Progress only	43
Glorifying only	33
Critical only	51

Note: Remaining counts constitute co-occurrences with other narrative categories; Co-occurrences between Progress and Critical narratives were coded under a distinct category named 'Critical Progress' as these showed recurrent and meaningful patterns in their own right.

On the other hand, the lack of Glorifying and Critical co-occurrences suggests conflict or incompatibility between these themes.

3.2.1 | Progress

The most popular narrative of *Progress* described America as a nation that, despite having an imperfect or difficult past, has the capacity to grow past it: 'Things are not as rosy as we wish them to be, but we can overcome'.[2] Importantly, whenever an imperfect past was alluded to, these were defined in very vague terms or only implicitly communicated through a positive temporal contrast to the past, such as 'how far we have come as a nation' or how 'the arc of justice is headed in a positive direction'. In this way, Progress narratives focused on positive social change (or the potential for it) while avoiding explicit attributions for America's problems: 'America isn't perfect, but it's worth fighting for'. Responses that were coded as 'Critical progress' (a separate category) explicitly acknowledged ingroup flaws and wrongdoings while also recognising the progress that has or could be made (e.g. 'all groups

[2] All quotes that are presented come from separate responses.

mentioned in those 4 events had to fight to get laws changed to have the same rights as the majority'). However, generalised Progress narratives were much more common than those more nuanced perspectives. Vague acknowledgements of America as an imperfect nation worked to justify the ongoing aspiration for progress as the nation's shared mission (Wertsch, 2021).

This framing of continuous improvement and growth ('America strives to improve and learn') echoes the narrative arc of redemption that individuals from Western contexts commonly draw on for constructing personal life narratives (McAdams, 2006). A redemptive narrative places agency with the subject to *choose* to do what is right: 'Human society is filled with a lot of struggles and pains. In spite of the pains, we ought not to sit without taking risk'. In this way, the path to progress is framed as a moral choice, earned through one's own will and intention, and can even contribute to justifying past (albeit vaguely defined) mistakes: 'We are forced to accept positive change though trial'.

Relatedly, Progress narratives emphasised the 'hard work' that it takes for achieving social progress. In this way, they were explicitly goal-oriented, describing various ways of working, striving, achieving, learning, developing, or growing to positive ends: '…despite setbacks many people still labour to ensure that these goals will one day be met'. These themes echo life-narratives of hard work leading to upward mobility, or the promise of the 'American Dream' (Beasley, 2001). Many responses further focused on the inherent resilience or bravery of Americans in dealing with difficult events throughout history, again communicating a story of growth through struggle and hardship: 'Americans are resilient. This country has been through a lot in its rather short history, but we've always managed to come back better', 'never lose sight of the greater good that is to come out of adversity', 'they show that the American people ultimately rose above the hardships and strife and continued on, working for a better future'. This particular framing of negative events in the past as adversity further defuses ingroup accountability and blame from such negative events, with the promise of hard work and adversity creating a better present and future.

Importantly, the Progress narratives that were articulated did not always reflect a temporally positive linear trajectory that is commonly associated with the arc of progress (Topçu & Hirst, 2020). A linear trajectory did not fit with Progress narratives that began with a positive starting point rooted in national foundations: 'The Declaration which declared that all men were created equal and had the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness was not instantly bestowed on all just because it was written. These events show the hard work and sacrifice it takes to make those words a reality'.

This framework of interpreting American history through a vague or simplified framework of progress (mainly encompassing themes of resilience, hard work and growth) may work to provide a source of symbolic coping (Wagner et al., 2002) through the vicissitudes of time (Sani et al., 2009): 'While not perfect, or in any way universal throughout the country, I think these major events show what Americans hope our country can still be'. After selecting only those narratives that were only coded under a single category, a one-way ANOVA found an overall significant difference in event valence across the major narratives, $F(2, 504) = 62.58$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .2$. Mean event valence associated with Progress narratives ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 2.54$) was *not* significantly different when compared to Glorifying narratives ($M = 4.9$, $SD = 2.34$). However, mean event valence of both Progress and Glorifying narratives were significantly *more positive* compared to Critical narratives ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 2.12$, p's $< .001$).

3.2.2 | Glorifying

Glorifying narratives communicated overtly positive evaluations of America through descriptions of strength, leadership or influence in international/global affairs and greatness or exceptionalism in general. This was typically framed as a positive social comparison with other countries. Such comparisons were most explicit in responses that discussed America's participation in wars and conflicts: 'The events describe the greatness of America and how we responded to defeat enemies and protect the world. America protected the world from the evils of the Nazis and the Japanese empire in WWII and ended the Holocaust. America defeated communism at the fall of the Berlin Wall and overcame the attacks of 9/11'.

This emphasis on dominance, strength and victory in warfare communicated an underlying sense of heroism, self-mythologisation and national pride. In relation to this, a sub-theme of the Glorifying narrative was identified where events were interpreted in line with mythologies of America as a global 'Defender of Freedom' (Liu et al., 2005; Wertsch & O'Connor, 1994): 'It is worth it to fight for freedom against tyranny and evil forces', 'The narrative is our emergence as the land of the free', 'The people here and around the world who look toward us as the beacon of hope and freedom'.[3] In these ways, Glorifying narratives were blatantly patriotic. Unlike Progress narratives, there were no attempts to deal (no matter how vaguely) with negative aspects of America's past.

Similar to Progress narratives, Glorifying narratives interpreted national foundations positively, and this was often used to corroborate claims of the country's exceptionalism: 'It's the narrative of the creation and building of the world's greatest democracy', 'Probably no country in the world has been as influential as the USA and that process started with its independence'. However, rather than focusing on the inherent struggle of living up to these founding principles, Glorifying narratives tended to emphasise the importance of *preserving* and protecting these already realised ideals from deterioration or threat: 'These events show the beginning of a great nation, a preservation of that nation and its values, an outside attack on this nation, and an internal attack', 'I believe that we must examine all policies through the lens of our constitution. When we waver from our foundation there will be imbalance somewhere which may lead to collapse—of our economy, or security, etc'. In this way, Glorifying narratives seemed to align with an essentialist orientation to ingroup identity, which prioritises

[3] All counts and analyses reported in these results combines the main category (Glorifying) with its sub-category (Defender of Freedom).

continuity and homogeneity of ingroup values over time (Sani et al., 2009).

3.2.3 | Critical

Narratives that explicitly expressed specific critiques of America's faults, failures, misdeeds or wrongdoings (past and present), were categorised as *Critical* narratives. Beyond Simko's (2022) traumatic temporality which focuses on the ongoing legacy of racial violence and slavery, there was an array of content that was drawn upon for applying a Critical narrative. This included critical evaluations of the US government (including politicians), racial injustice, economic inequality, US military aggression and interventionism, colonialism, the education system (most notably, the sanitisation of history), capitalism and the meaning of America itself: 'American citizens grow up with the belief that we are inherently better than and blessed before others, which means that we have a lot of systems to dismantle and beliefs to unlearn'.

A key factor for distinguishing a Critical narrative from a narrative of Decline (see the Supporting Information), was that negative evaluations were attributed to *structural* problems. In cases where critique was attributed to individuals, they were explicitly acknowledged as individuals with access to power: 'The United States of America is a country founded by white property-owning men who put the interests of white property-owning men first', 'America is built on class warfare. In order for a handful billionaires to thrive millions of minorities and others must be exploited and abused'. In this way, Critical narratives mainly worked to communicate an ongoing sense of injustice (see Freel & Bilali, 2022). On the other hand, narratives of Decline tended to communicate a generalised sense of negativity, pessimism, or anxiety.

Critical narratives acknowledged historical and societal problems without turning to redemptive or nostalgic justifications through temporal contrasts; that is, without presenting temporal alternatives for how things were (Decline) or could be (Progress). Instead, rhetorical contrasts were drawn between America's ideals and reality to reveal contradictions and communicate a sense of disillusionment: 'We fought to be free of England, with admirable goals which "we" promptly forgot in our suppression of native peoples and economically based racial inequities'.

Directly counter to the former narratives, Critical narratives tended to interpret national foundations negatively, often expressed through explicit rejection or 'rewriting' of the popular origin story: 'The US was founded on human rights violations', 'We have racism ingrained into our society, we were built and founded on it', 'We are founded on racism, colonialism, and the pursuit of happiness at others' expense', 'I believe that the government that the founding fathers created no longer works. It needs a major overhaul'. As mentioned, historical events remembered through a Critical lens were evaluated significantly more negatively than both other narratives discussed above.

3.3 | Historical representations as content for narratives

Our content analysis of historical events (see Table 4) demonstrated that temporally distant events were much more salient in Progress and Glorifying narratives, while there was greater incorporation of living historical memories in Critical narratives. When specific events were grouped into relevant content categories (see Table S2 in the Supporting Information for these full coding details), both Progress (χ^2 (1, 399) = 13.85, $p < .001$) and Glorifying narratives (χ^2 (1, 399) = 32.11, $p < .001$) were significantly more likely to mention events related to national foundations compared to the rest of the sample. In turn, Critical narratives were significantly *less* likely to mention national foundations compared to the rest of the sample (χ^2 (1, 399) = 18.54, $p < .001$), while being significantly more likely to mention events related to ingroup atrocities (χ^2 (1, 399) = 42.03, $p < .001$).

Given that the narrative categories were not mutually exclusive, some events were indeed associated with more than one narrative at a time. However, these averaged scores are still useful for indicating general directions in which these events tended to be evaluated, depending on the kind of narratives that they were associated with. Positive narratives about the nation appeared to be anchored by a consensual importance and positive view assigned to national foundations. This indicates success of state efforts to impart positive or inspiring narratives of the nation through national commemorations like the 4th of July. On the other hand, the more negative remembrances associated with Critical narratives appeared to stem from much more recent events. The averaged dates of events that were nominated alongside Critical narratives were more recent compared to the dates associated with Progress and Glorifying narratives overall (see Table 2). When comparing only those narratives that were assigned a single code, we found in a one-way ANOVA that this difference was significant, $F(2, 481) = 12.96$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = .051$. While Progress (M = 1919, *SD* = 86.75) and Glorifying (M = 1900, *SD* = 94.94) narratives were not significantly different from each other, the dates associated with Critical narratives (M = 1950, *SD* = 82.96) were significantly more recent compared to both Progress ($p = .003$) and Glorifying ($p < .001$) narratives.

Given that the valence of events was negatively correlated with the date of events ($r = -.282$, $p < .001$), more recent events tend to be interpreted more negatively than ones more distant in the past. Moreover, being anchored in this negative present-day climate seems to be conducive to constructing narratives that are critical of the nation. To further demonstrate this point, we compared counts of events that were salient in the immediate context for Americans during the time of data collection. Counts of the Capitol riot were significantly higher in Critical narratives compared to the rest of the sample (χ^2 (1, 399) = 7.69, $p = .006$). While counts of the Afghanistan War (N = 9) and retreat (N = 8) did not show any significant differences, counts of the Vietnam War were significantly more salient in Critical narratives compared to the rest of the sample (χ^2 (1, 399) = 8.79, $p = .003$). This may be because America's failure in Vietnam (remembered very

TABLE 4 Frequencies and mean valence of the top events nominated across narratives.

Progress				Glorifying				Critical			
Event	Date	%	Valence M (*SD*)	Event	Date	%	Valence M (*SD*)	Event	Date	%	Valence M (*SD*)
9/11	2001	54.5	1.89 (1.8)	9/11	2001	61.5	2.06 (1.87)	9/11	2001	44.6	1.36 (0.86)
Civil War	1865	40.9	4.52 (2.36)	Independence	1776	48.1	**6.8** (0.5)	Civil War	1865	30.4	4.29 (2.26)
Independence	1776	34.8	**6.61** (1.03)	Civil War	1865	36.5	5 (2.26)	Vietnam War	1975	32.2	**1.23** (0.6)
Revolution	1775	24.2	**6.44** (0.81)	Revolution	1775	25	**6.38** (0.96)	Trail of Tears	1850	21.4	1.58 (1.73)
WWII	1945	21.2	4.79 (2.05)					Capitol Riots	2021	21.4	1.17 (0.39)

Note: Events with clearly positive or negative valences are highlighted in bold.

TABLE 5 Frequencies of main narratives across partisan groups.

Republicans (N = 52)	%	Democrats (N = 152)	%	Independents (N = 51)	%
Progress	25	Progress	25	Progress	23.5
Glorifying	32.7	Glorifying	13.2	Glorifying	13.7
Critical	3.8	Critical	23.7	Critical	27.5

negatively as shown in Table 4) was salient as a historical analogy (Ghilani et al., 2017; Schuman & Rieger, 1992) for the Afghanistan withdrawal that was unfolding at the time.

3.4 | Narrative landscape across groups

3.4.1 | Differences by partisanship

We mapped the prevalence of these narratives across partisan groups (see Table 5). This revealed that Critical narratives were significantly more prevalent among Democrats (χ^2 (1, 295) = 10.54, p = .002) and Independents (χ^2 (1, 144) = 13.51, p < .001) compared to Republicans. In turn, Glorifying narratives showed significantly greater prevalence among Republicans compared to Democrats (χ^2 (1, 295) = 7.59, p = .006). Interestingly, there were no partisan differences in the prevalence of *Progress* narratives indicating that they may allow for a less divisive interpretation of the nation's past and origins. While Glorifying narratives may blatantly ignore the ingroup atrocities, Progress narratives may at least show attempts to deal (albeit vaguely) with the cognitive dissonance presented by past atrocities through redemptive justification, thus accommodating to a wider range of political interests (see Table S3 in the Supporting Information for a further comparison of narrative co-occurrences across partisan affiliations).

3.4.2 | Differences by ethnic identification

Table 6 shows the extent to which each narrative was shared among different ethnicities in the sample. It appeared that White participants endorsed more Progress and Glorifying narratives, whereas most ethnic minority groups endorsed more Critical narratives. This accords with the idea that national charter narratives are typically narrated from the dominant group's perspective, working to maintain their positive image, interests and status legitimacy (Liu & Hilton, 2005).

Given that counts of each ethnic minority group were relatively low, we combined them to draw comparisons between majority and minority groups. We only found significant differences in endorsement of the Critical narrative, where a greater proportion of ethnic minorities endorsed Critical narratives compared to White Americans, χ^2 (1, 399) = 5.29, p = .021 (see Table 7).

Table 8 displays example quotes of how each major narrative was expressed across majority and minority groups. There was considerable commonality in narrative content across ethnic groups. Extracts from Glorifying narratives showed common expressions of the country's greatness, strength, influence and a consciousness of growing threat to the nation. Among Progress narratives were common expressions of social change and development as accomplishments, national ideals of justice and fairness as admirable, and Americans' resilience over adversity.

Finally, Critical narratives also showed resonance across ethnic groups despite being much more specific in their content. A resistance to the mythologising of America was provided by both majority ('a thinly veneered myth of American exceptionalism') and minority extracts ('the belief that we are inherently better than and blessed before others'). Critiques of racism and the systematic sanitisation of history were also highlighted by members of both groups. However, it is interesting to note that these were often expressed from an insider position by White participants ('It's really sad that **we** can't own up to horrible things **we've** done'; '**we** have racism ingrained into **our** society') to communicate a sense of ingroup accountability and blame. For ethnic minorities, these were expressed without signifiers of

TABLE 6 Ethnic group breakdown of the main narratives.

	Progress %	Glorifying %	Critical %	Total (N)
White	16.8	14.6	11.4	280
Black/African-American	16.7	7.4	16.7	54
Hispanic	7.1	0	21.4	14
Native American	50	0	25	4
Asian	8.8	14.7	20.6	34
Multiple races	30	20	40	10
Other	33.3	0	0	3

TABLE 7 Frequencies of main narratives across majority and minority ethnic groups.

	Progress %	Glorifying %	Critical %	Total (N)
White	16.8	14.6	11.4	280
Minorities	16	9.2	20.2	119

ingroup membership, whether that be from a directly affected victim ('the white washing in school teachings **in America**') or an observing outsider ('Racism is a significant part of **US history and institutions**') position.

3.5 | Associations of narratives with national identity and political attitudes

Through a series of logistic regressions, we obtained bivariate odds ratios to examine whether these narratives bear associations with demographic characteristics and identity as well as current political attitudes. As would be expected, there were significant associations with *political orientation* where increases in a left-leaning orientation was associated with a reduced likelihood for endorsing Glorifying (OR: 0.8; 95% CI [0.672, 0.951]) and higher likelihood for endorsing Critical narratives (OR: 1.58; 95% CI [1.287, 1.928]). However, in terms of other demographic variables (age, self-reported status and education), there were no significant associations found.

Next, we turn to measures of national identification. Being higher on general national identification was associated with an increased probability of endorsing Glorifying narratives (OR: 1.42; 95% CI [1.137, 1.784]) and in turn, a decreased probability of endorsing Critical narratives (OR: 0.61; 95% CI [0.508, 0.726]). We found the same pattern with blind patriotism where higher scores were associated with an increased probability of endorsing Glorifying (OR: 1.2; 95% CI [1.002, 1.447]) and reduced probability of endorsing Critical narratives (OR: 0.48; 95% CI [0.362, 0.637]). Interestingly, with constructive patriotism, we found that higher scores were associated with increased likelihoods of endorsing both Progress (OR: 1.47; 95% CI (1.067, 2.029]) and Critical narratives (OR: 1.51; 95% CI (1.067, 2.142]), while there was no association with Glorifying narratives. Also relevant to nation building, we found that greater participation in 4th of July commemorations was associated with higher likelihoods to endorse both Progress (OR: 1.22; 95% CI [1.016, 1.453]) and Glorifying narratives (OR: 1.25; 95% CI [1.025, 1.531]) and in turn, a lower likelihood of endorsing Critical narratives (OR: 0.76; 95% CI [0.632, 0.901]).

Out of interest, we examined associations between a *lack* of narrative (i.e. those who selected 'No' when asked whether they perceived a meaningful narrative in their nominated events) and identity. We found that *not* perceiving any meaningful narrative was associated with lower constructive patriotism (OR: 0.57; 95% CI [0.452, 0.726]), and was unrelated with blind patriotism. Moreover, a general ahistorical orientation (e.g. 'I don't care about the history of my country', see the Supporting Information for items) was also negatively correlated with constructive patriotism ($r = -.304, p < .001$), while being unrelated with blind patriotism.

Finally, we examined associations with political attitudes that were relevant to the present context. Being higher on both anti-war attitudes (OR: 2.07; 95% CI [1.503, 2.862]) and willingness to vote (OR: 1.37; 95% CI [1.104; 1.698]) were associated with an increased probability of endorsing Critical narratives (but not associated with the other narratives). Higher justification of America's response to 9/11 was associated with an increased probability of endorsing Glorifying narratives (OR: 1.31; 95% CI [1.099, 1.568]) and in turn, a lower probability of endorsing Critical narratives (OR: 0.65; 95% CI [0.545, 0.777]).

4 | DISCUSSION

The current study examined how American lay people construct historical narratives about their nation. Through our analysis, we described three popular narratives. These included narratives of progress, narratives that were glorifying of the nation and narratives that were critical of the nation. Progress and Glorifying narratives aligned closely with popular rhetoric in the United States (e.g. Simko, 2022; Wertsch, 2021). Critical narratives reflected a broader orientation of perceiving ongoing injustice, commonly found across contexts of resistance (Freel & Bilali, 2022). Importantly, there was no narrative that was endorsed by a clear majority of the sample. Furthermore, a 'mnemonic standoff' (Wertsch, 2021) between Glorifying and Critical narratives mapped directly onto the polarisation between Republicans and Democrats, suggesting a landscape of contested and politicised narratives about the past, and especially of national origins.

TABLE 8 Sample of narrative quotes across ethnic groups.

White	Ethnic minorities
Glorifying	
These events show the beginning of **a great nation**, a preservation of that nation and its values, an outside attack on this nation, and an internal attack.	The events describe **the greatness of America** and how we responded to defeat enemies and protect the world. America protected the world from the evils of the Nazis and the Japanese empire in WWII and ended the Holocaust. America defeated communism at the fall of the Berlin Wall and overcame the attacks of 9/11. (Asian)
…America, as an international leader, has always been in the focus of attention of other countries and that is why any event inside the country had an impact on the whole world—be it a formation of a new democratic state (event 1), exploration of new territories (event 2), painstaking efforts to survive and thrive (event 3) and **the threats to its existence nowadays** (event 4)	I believe that we must examine all policies through the lens of our constitution. **When we waver from our foundation there will be imbalance somewhere which may lead to collapse**—of our economy, or security, and so on. (Multiple Races)
All these events describes the narrative that, Americans **are stronger and united more than any nation of the world**.	America is **strong and its impact in modern world** is huge. (Asian)
Progress	
The Vietnam war aside, I feel like the other events eventually help lead this country to elect President Obama because **people were ready for progress and change**.	The series of events written above, from the event of moon landing, Obama's election, Terrorist attack of September 11th and the declaration of independence **helped America to grow significantly in numerous areas and developed rapidly** at a very higher pace. (African-American)
America and its **people stand up for what is right**. Protecting human rights and working together.	America is a vastly transforming landscape. America went from aggressive initiatives for negative change and also for positive change. This to me means exactly what **America is all about 'The Land of Opportunity'**. (Multiple races)
On a positive note about these four terrible events in US history, they show that **the American people ultimately rose above the hardships and strife and continued on, working for a better future**.	When life gives us lemons we make lemonade and **never lose sight of the greater good that is to come out of adversity**. (African-American)
Critical	
The preservation of white supremacy through state-sanctioned violence and oppression towards people of colour—**under a thinly veneered myth of American exceptionalism sold and widely believed by white Americans**.	The narrative is conflict and with the United States **needing to prove its power and divine right as the greatest nation**…We often feel that the world should follow our lead, speak our language, embrace our culture. It means that **American citizens grow up with the belief that we are inherently better than and blessed before others**. Which means that we have a lot of systems to dismantle and beliefs to unlearn. (Multiple races)
We, as a people, have allowed ourselves to become detached from uncomfortable moments in history. Each of the events I listed are either not talked about or denied. **It's really sad that we can't own up to horrible things we've done in the past,** whether decades ago, or just last year.	Don't erase black history. As a person of colour **it is extremely sad that I was denied the right to learn about what really happened in history to my ancestors because of the white washing in school teachings** in America. (African-American)
3 of the 4 events I included directly involve race and racism. **The United States is an incredibly racist country, we have racism ingrained into our society, we were built and founded on it**. It is something we need to actively work to dismantle that not enough people are looking towards.	**Racism is a significant part of US history and institutions**. It explains the recent chaos in US politics and society that arose from a very long history. It shows there's much more work to be done to improve equality. (Asian)

Note: Similar expressions of content (emphasised in bold) are positioned on the same row.

4.1 | Progress and glorification: Different stories from common origins

Historical representations differed in content and evaluation across the main narratives that were identified, showing that historical events are actively used as symbolic resources to serve a wider narrative (Liu & László, 2007). In particular, we found positive (and salient) representations of national foundations underpinning the narratives of progress and glorification. Both narratives were also associated with higher participation in 4th of July commemorations. However, given that these

narratives have distinct trajectories, this suggests that there is some narrative agency in *how* Americans interpret a positive trajectory from their nation's origins to the present (albeit choosing from a 'stock of stories' that are culturally available to them, see Wertsch, 2002).

Through narratives of progress, people interpreted America's founding ideals as being admirable yet still out of reach (see Wertsch, 2021). Contingent on this interpretation, history is narrated through the nation's continuous and ongoing quest to live up to such high-minded ideals. This fits the progressive rhetoric of politicians identified by Simko (2022) where America 'moves optimistically forward' (p. 74), through commitment to the secular scripture to form a 'more perfect union'. Progress narratives resembled a form of interpretive denial by providing a way of humbly acknowledging an imperfect past while framing past injustices as being already resolved, less severe or as necessary lessons on the way to a better future.

Here, it is important to note that the narrativising of American progress is and has been separate from real, objective markers of progress. Research corroborates this gap, as Kraus and colleagues (2017) have shown how American individuals are motivated to overestimate social and economic progress toward egalitarianism between White and Black Americans. This motivated optimism has implications for policy, as research has also shown how perceiving progress in racial equality tends to be related with lower support for affirmative action by White Americans (Brodish et al., 2008). This is likely because an arc of progress conveys the present as the best time in history (de la Sablonniere et al., 2013). Such feel-good rhetoric may be especially useful for Americans in coping with the fundamental contradiction between the nation's egalitarian ideals and history of racial domination (Shklar, 1991). Indeed, our findings showed how the articulation of progress lacked acknowledgement of specific details about America's 'imperfect' past, suggesting either a lack of knowledge or motivated misperception.

In Glorifying narratives, America's founding ideals are interpreted as setting the nation up to be the best country and democracy in the world. History is narrated through the nation's preservation of those ideals, typically through conflict or warfare. This resembles one major dimension of nostalgic rhetoric, namely the mythologising of the nation's distant past which is then used to justify its unique and superior status over others (Wildschut et al., 2014). Such differing frameworks for understanding the nation ought to bear implications for how individuals deal with ingroup wrongdoings, as well as other relevant political and intergroup attitudes in the present. Indeed, we found in our data that while the endorsement of Glorifying narratives was associated with greater justification for America's aggressive policy in response to 9/11, the endorsement of Progress narratives was not. Similarly, only the endorsement of Glorifying narratives was positively associated with blindly patriotic attitudes and a more right-leaning political orientation.

Being the most popular narrative that was shared, a progressive view of the nation seems to serve a particularly important purpose for American self-understanding. This may partially be attributed to contextual factors. For example, while the decision to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan was supported by most Americans according to a Pew Research article (2021), there was an even bigger majority who agreed that the United States mostly failed in achieving its goals in Afghanistan. The Capitol insurrection was also relatively salient as a recent memory in this sample (being within the top ten nominated events). Such a climate may not be conducive to espousing narratives that blatantly glorify the nation. Future research should consider specific enablers and constraints embedded in the context that mobilises a narrative. Understanding such contextual factors (through field or experimental studies) would be central to understanding the situational dynamics of identity entrepreneurship (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) within national and political communities.

4.2 | The critical (counter)narrative and resistance

A key distinction of the Critical narrative was the relative absence of positively regarded national origin events. Furthermore, a critical self-awareness of America's 'official' origin story was often explicitly acknowledged. This suggests that it is not merely a lack of knowledge about foundational myths, but a conscious awareness of their cultural curation and an intentional resistance against buying into them. This in turn, left more room for anchoring the narrative with more recent events and ingroup atrocities. Although level of education was not associated with the endorsement of Critical narratives, there may be some influence from recent changes in educational practices (like the introduction of Black History Month) and increasing exposure to historical discourses led by activism outside of 'official' commemorative spaces (e.g. the Black Lives Matter Movement).

Central to the perception of ongoing injustice (Freel & Bilali, 2022) was a marked salience of recent, lived events in the historical repertoire associated with Critical narratives. In addition to the dates being more recent, there were more events nominated that were directly relevant to the present context. The salience of the Vietnam War in particular suggests a recognition of how an event from the past can be applied to think critically about the present (Schuman & Rieger, 1992). The finding that Critical narratives were significantly more prevalent among ethnic minorities further suggests that particularly those events directly experienced, witnessed, or shared within minority communities are what contribute to the emergence of counter-narratives (Freire, 1973). Allyship is also important, as we qualitatively observed how (a substantial minority) of majority group members expressed Critical narratives via a sense ingroup accountability in place of direct experience. Further investigation into how living memories communicatively develop into Critical narratives may contribute to better understanding the aetiology of how counter-narratives develop from the bottom-up, especially for contexts where critically conscious education may not be easily accessible.

Although some have pointed out that a narrative that fixates on the longevity of injustice can lead to hopelessness (Aubin et al., 2016; van Zomeren et al., 2008), perceiving long-standing injustice also leads to heightened anger and contempt, thereby providing fuel for collective action (Freel & Bilali, 2022). Though we did not measure collective action intentions directly, we did observe how endorsing

Critical narratives was positively associated with voting intentions and anti-war attitudes, while the other narratives were not.

Although two of the three most popular narratives reflected positively on the nation, when looking at overall responses of the sample, positive narratives were far from hegemonic. Specifically, the more minor 'conflict', 'decline over time' and 'trauma' narratives (see the Supporting Information) have points of overlap in content with the critical narrative, as well as being associated with more negative and recent events in history overall. Narratives composed from positive/neutral events totalled to 178 responses, compared to 118 responses articulating negative narratives (see Table 2). Thus, rather than being a minority position, critical or disenchanted views on national history may be nearly as widespread (or at least on the rise) as their more celebratory or complacent counterparts (see also Choi et al., 2023; Yamashiro & Roediger III, 2019).

4.3 | Narrative and identity

Each of the major narratives showed some relationship with measures of national identity, supporting the idea that historical narratives provide meaningful content for understanding and expressing ingroup identity. Progress and Critical narratives were unrelated (or negatively related for the latter) with national identity, however both were positively associated with constructive patriotism. This corroborates research in the conceptualisation of identity as a multidimensional construct (Roccas et al., 2006). This particular mode of identification, which involves being more critically or constructively attached to one's nation, has been associated with a willingness to criticise the ingroup to change it for the better (see also Schatz & Staub, 1997). Endorsing progressive and critical narratives seems to inform a sense of identification that holds the ingroup to greater account (Schatz & Staub, 1997). Such findings are especially interesting given that partisan affiliation (Republican versus Democrat) was *not* associated with constructive patriotism, highlighting the potential of narrative in developing a constructive sense of identity, *beyond* pre-existing left/right ideology (Hanson, O'Dwyer, & Lyons, 2019).

In turn, the espousal of Glorifying narratives was associated with a blind attachment to one's nation that is typically associated with uncritical conformity and intolerance of criticism (Schatz & Staub, 1997). As such, it made sense for these narratives to be associated with ingroup defensive attitudes such as justification for the military response to 9/11 even when such attitudes may have been controversial in the context of the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Finally, we also found how *no* endorsement of a historical narrative was associated with lower constructive patriotism and unrelated with other measures of identity. This aligns with the idea that those who do *not* perceive meaningful identity content (whether that be positive or negative content) are those who are actually more disidentified with the nation overall (Penic et al., 2016).

A link may be drawn here between glorifying narratives and ingroup glorification (Roccas et al., 2006), which has been associated with systematic denial of ingroup-perpetrated harms, lack of outgroup perspective taking, dehumanisation of outgroup members and the legitimisation of violence against outgroup members (e.g. Bilali, 2013; Leidner et al., 2010; Li et al., 2023). Importantly, some recent studies have begun to explore how exposure to narratives may shape, direct and contextualise ingroup glorification by providing it with content. For example, Americans and Israeli Jews exposed to critical narratives of conflicts involving their group demonstrated reduced ingroup glorification, but not attachment (McLamore et al., 2019). This provides further support that glorifying and critical narratives are directly opposed, while also indicating that glorifying narratives may provide necessary content for mobilising ingroup glorification. Future studies should examine associations as well as causal relationships between the identified narratives and measures of ingroup glorification (versus attachment) to extend these ideas.

Although findings from narrative intervention studies would suggest that narratives have transformative potential to reinforce, shift, or alter modes of group identification, our current findings suggest that a reciprocal relationship between narrative and identity is more likely (see also Salter & Adams, 2016). When asked to assemble narratives of their own volition, our participants came up with narratives that aligned with pre-existing individual differences (political orientation) and sub-group identities (partisan affiliation and ethnic identification). This suggests that while we may use narrative-based interventions to temporarily challenge hegemonic narratives, in the absence of such prompts, participants tend to re-create narratives that feed back into priming and reinforcing their own pre-existing identification modalities. Such findings provide directions for understanding specific limitations and the need to consider individual differences in the important work of developing narrative interventions (see also Klar & Baram, 2016).

There are a few limitations of note for the current study. Regarding the sample, there was an over-representation of Democrats and Whites in the sample. Relatedly, given the low number of ethnic minorities in our sample, we could not examine associations of narratives for ethnic groups separately. It is likely that these narratives have different motivations and meaning for minority groups. For example, Selvanathan et al (2022) showed that historical narratives held by African-Americans tended to follow a progressive arc, beginning in experiences of victimisation and oppression, followed by instances of resistance and resilience. In this way, progressive narratives may serve a more specific identity-empowering function for minority groups, while still being critical and recognising the need for structural change (example response: 'As an African-American I can see our historical challenges, I can embrace our accomplishments and I can see the work that still needs to be in our quest to recognised as full Americans').

The high number of narratives that were identified meant that the three main narratives only represented a minority of the sample overall. Although this partly stems from our analytic procedure which aimed to identify specific narrative themes, it also highlights that there was considerable fragmentation of historical narratives in our sample, and suggests that there is no consensually endorsed historical narrative in the United States (at the moment). This diversity in and of itself provides an important and useful insight from doing bottom-up

research. Future research may extend upon this work cross-culturally, and it would be interesting to observe not only differences in content, but also variation in level of fragmentation across different national contexts.

In terms of methodology, we also acknowledge that the findings reported in this study could be subject to order effects where being reminded about history in the beginning of the survey could have heightened a sense of national identification in the later items. As such, it is recommended for future studies to counterbalance the order of items about historical narratives and identity to further disentangle this relationship.

Following on from these qualitative findings, it would be beneficial to develop and validate culturally meaningful scales that can measure the degree of identification with ingroup narratives. This would be helpful for measuring how narratives guide specific attitudes and actions in the present in a standardised way (the past weighing on the present), as well as sensitively measuring the effects of *context* on how people interact with popular ingroup narratives (the present weighing on the past: see Liu & Khan, 2021 for further discussion). The latter would be critical for building upon the interdisciplinary work of Assmann (2013), Schwartz (1996; 1997) and Freire (1973) to demonstrate how social and political contexts are related to processes of *change* that emerge from the individual level of meaning-making.

To conclude, narratives are important in providing *meaning* for national identification. The popular narratives identified in the present context are likely to be different to those identified in other places, such as narratives of victimhood in places like Eastern Europe (Obradović, 2016), which because of differences in meaning, are expected to bear different implications and associations with identity. We may also expect different narrative landscapes depending on the group, their political context and history. For example, Soroka & Krawatzek (2021) suggested that historical narratives in Russia are likely to be hegemonic and more stable given the heavy and prolonged influence of the state in history education. Narratives provide the tools for mobilising individuals as members of a group, and knowing these narratives provides us with the understanding of how these tools work, are used and can be *changed* by people embedded within these groups. Significant differences in the kinds of narratives that were endorsed across groups suggest that America's present context of political polarisation is feeding into the divergence and pluralisation of collective remembering at the individual level. Progress seems to provide a recognisable framework for interpreting positive and somewhat constructive meaning in American identity. However, more polarised narratives also appear available, with important implications for the mobilisation of identity and resistance in this context.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The full dataset is available upon request from the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors confirm that the manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of conduct. This study was evaluated according to Massey University's Code of Ethical Conduct and approved to be low risk. All participants gave their informed consent prior to their participation in the study and anonymity of all participants has been maintained throughout the manuscript.

TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

The authors confirm that this manuscript is an honest, accurate and transparent account of the study being reported and that no important aspects of the study have been omitted from reporting. The study's design and its analysis were exploratory and not pre-registered.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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