Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism? Intergenerational Comparisons on Collective Memories and Emotions about Belgium's Colonial Past

Laurent Licata, Social Psychology Unit, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium
Olivier Klein, Social Psychology Unit, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Vol. 4 (1) 2010

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

46

Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism? Intergenerational Comparisons on Collective Memories and Emotions about Belgium's Colonial Past

Laurent Licata, Social Psychology Unit, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium
Olivier Klein, Social Psychology Unit, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

After publication of Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* in 1998, asserting that King Leopold II had been responsible for a "holocaust" in the Congo and the heated public debate this provoked, we set out to study Belgian people's reactions to these accusations. In two studies we compared collective memories of and emotions associated with Belgium's colonial action in the Congo in different generations. Results show higher levels of collective guilt and support for reparative actions among young adults than among older generations. This difference can be explained either by referring to the different ideological backgrounds in which different generations were socialized, as evidenced by stark differences in collective memories of colonialism, or by referring to the influence of national identification. Indeed, people could adapt their representations of colonialism in order to avoid experiencing a social identity threat. However, evidence for the identity-protecting functions of collective memories and collective emotions was only found in the older generations: young people held negative representations of colonialism independently of their level of national identification. We refer to the normative dimension of collective guilt to interpret these results.

1. A Severed Bronze Hand

An imposing statuary group stands by the sea in Ostend, Belgium, erected in 1931 to honor the city's "genial protector", King Leopold II. The statuary group is dominated by an equestrian statue of the king, with two sets of figures looking up to him in gratitude: on one side local fishermen, peasants and city dwellers, on the other, Congolese people accompanied by a European explorer (probably Stanley). In 2004, a local anarchist group *(De Stoete Ostendenoare)*, cut the hand off one of the Congolese figures.

One of the members explained in an anonymous newspaper interview that their action had been a protest against the official version—as stated on a nearby plaque—that the Congolese were grateful to the Belgian king for freeing them from Arab slavery (De Coninck 2005). The anarchists offered to return the stolen hand in exchange for a rectification: "This is pure revisionism. What King Leopold II did was to administer the Congo as his private property and exploit the Congolese in his rubber plantations. Everyone knows it was common practice to cut off the hands of Con-

golese who were judged to be lazy. This is why we severed the hand. It makes the image more realistic" (translated from De Coninck 2005). Today, the hand is still missing.

This incident reveals much about the Belgians' relationship with the memory of the colonization of the Congo. To start with, it opposes two radically different versions of Belgium's colonial history. The first, symbolized by the monument, is a narrative of civilization and development accomplished by the Belgians, under the guidance of Leopold II. In less than eighty years they turned this *terra incognita*—this "heart of darkness" (Conrad 1902) fallen prey to hostile nature, continuous tribal wars, and cruel slave traders—into a prosperous land equipped with a modern infrastructure, means of communication, hospitals, and schools. We found expressions of that representation when we interviewed former Belgian colonials for a previous study (Licata and Klein 2005). They compared the relationship between colonizers and colonized to that between parents and children. According to this paternalistic view (Jackman 1994), colonization was primarily aimed at fulfilling the needs of

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

47

the colonized, as a father would care for his children. They reminded us that the Congolese called the white colonials "Noko" (uncle). The second representation, the one symbolized by the anarchists' action, presents colonialism as a large-scale enterprise of systematic human rights violations—forced labor, bloody repression of uprisings, atrocities—for the benefit of first an unscrupulous king, later a nation of shameless exploiters.

These representations embody two different kinds of collective memory. The anarchists attack a vector of the official memory put forward by the authorities: cast in bronze, commemorated in collective rituals, taught in schoolbooks. They stand instead for a vivid, dissident memory, closer to the people, orally transmitted, and resisting official influence (van Ypersele 2006). They oppose "revisionism" and sought to render the representation "more realistic" by severing the hand.

During the past decade, the opposition between these two versions of the colonial past has come to the surface in different ways in Belgium. The conflict was triggered—or revived—in 1998 by the publication of American journalist Adam Hochschild's book *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, which was translated into French and Dutch the same year. A bestseller, the book resuscitated a long-forgotten controversy about the real nature of Leopoldian colonialism (Marechal 2005). Hochschild explains how Leopold II started by financing Henry Morton Stanley's expeditions to central Africa, then managed to convince the European powers to let him rule the Congolese territory (about eighty times the size of Belgium) at the 1885 Berlin Conference. The Congo Free State virtually became his private property, while the Belgian government was then uninvolved. Hochschild depicts a particularly brutal system of appropriation of territory, military suppression of rebels, exploitation of wealth and, especially, of the Congolese workforce. Citing extremely high numbers of casualties (ten million), the author calls the events of this period of Belgian colonialism a genocide (in French the book's subtitle became "un Holocauste oublié," or a forgotten Holocaust). He describes atrocities including killings, keeping women and children as hostages to force men to collect rubber in the forest, physical punishments, and in

particular, the severing of hands. Hochschild explains how soldiers of the colonial army fighting insurrections were ordered to bring back a hand of each person they killed to justify their use of ammunition. But soldiers would also cut off the hands of the living in order to use the ammunition for hunting. Photographs of severed hands and mutilated people are included in the book. These abuses were denounced by an international humanitarian campaign at the beginning of the twentieth century (Morel 1906), eventually leading Leopold II to donate the colony to the Belgian government in 1908. Congo then became a proper Belgian colony until 1960, when it gained its independence.

The book triggered contrasting reactions. First among historians, who questioned the validity of Hochschild's figures. Historians are still currently debating the exact extent of the harm done to the Congolese people during the different phases of Belgian colonialism (versus its benefits), the intentionality behind these sufferings, and the degree to which colonialism is responsible for the country's present situation (Ndaywel è Nziem 2005; Vellut 2005). But the book also aroused reactions among the public. Some—in particular the former colonials—expressed indignation, contesting and delegitimizing this version of history and stressing the positive side of colonialism in the journals and websites of colonial associations. Some even pressed for the banning of cultural events (for example Marc Twain's play *King Leopold's Soliloquy* in 2005). Other Belgians welcomed the book as a revelation, soon followed by a different kind of indignation: "Why hasn't this been made public before?" In both cases, the emotion—as a response to infamy or unveiled truth—was vividly felt. For both groups, the conflict between the two historical narratives was intertwined with concerns about the meaning of their identity.

As social psychologists, we have always been interested in the ways in which societal dynamics permeate individual psyches, as well as the ways in which psychological processes influence societal dynamics. Collective memory is one of those concepts that lie precisely at the interplay between the individual and society. As a consequence, we have followed the controversy over Belgium's colonial past with great attention, and started studying memories of the colonial past at the beginning of the 2000s (see Licata,

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

48

Klein, and Gurrieri in press for a general overview). In this article, we present the findings of two of these studies, focusing particularly on the changes in collective memories between the generation of Belgians born and raised during the colonial period and today's generation of young adults, and highlighting the role of collective emotions and identity concerns in that evolution.

2. Collective Memories through the Generations

Several definitions of collective memory are available.[1] They vary according to the standpoints of the different disciplines (Coman et al. 2009; Olick 1999; Wertsch and Roediger 2008). We adopt a definition that clearly situates collective memory at the interplay between processes of social representation (Moscovici 1961 [1976]) and social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1986): "a set of shared representations of the past based on group members' common identity" (Licata and Klein 2005). This definition echoes Maurice Halbwachs's conception: "While collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember" (Halbwachs 1980). Halbwachs also points out that collective memories form and are expressed in specific social frameworks (Halbwachs and Coser 1992), and that this framework's characteristics affect the content of memories as well as the ways in which events are remembered.

This last aspect of Halbwachs's theory has important implications for the way we appraise intergenerational differences in collective memories of colonial times. First, the social and ideological framework has changed dramatically during the last fifty years. Congo became independent in 1960. Belgian people born during or before that period grew up in a largely pro-colonial environment. Congo was pictured as "the best of the colonies," as Belgian colonialism was viewed as mainly benevolent and the Belgian Congo's material infrastructure was one of the most developed among European colonies. By contrast, contemporary Belgians have witnessed numerous controversies about the evils of colonialism, both Belgian and foreign. First anti-, then post-

colonial discourses have spread through Western societies (Loomba 2005; Young 2001; Fanon 1967; Memmi 1965) and shattered the former positive representation. As sociological studies demonstrate, people tend to remember the events that were salient during their adolescence and early adulthood (Schuman, Belli, and Bischoping 1997; Schuman and Rodgers 2004). Psychologists also study this "reminiscence bump" (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000). People tend to remember events in a way that is consistent with the social and ideological framework of their youth, so older Belgians should express more positive representations of the colonial past than young adults.

However, Halbwachs (1980) also points out that collective memory always serves contemporary functions: it "retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive" (80). This functional aspect of collective memory is also emphasized by Frederick Bartlett (1932), another pioneer of collective memory studies: "With the individual as with the group, the past is continually being re-made, reconstructed in the interests of the present" (309). Collective memories are not fixed once and for all in people's minds; they change in order to better fulfill their present functions. So generational differences might not (or not only) be due to differences in the social framework of the time they were encoded into memory, but also to the fact that memories can serve different functions in different generations. In particular, the identity functions of collective memories are often stressed (see Licata, Klein, and Gély 2007 for a review). People sometimes forget, distort, justify, or negate historical events in order to obtain or maintain a positive image of their group (Baumeister and Hastings 1997).

In this paper, we investigate how Belgians' memories of this past and the associated emotions and behavioral intentions are influenced both by the ways in which two (or three) generations of Belgians learned about their colonial history and by the effects of current identity concerns. For the sake of clarity of presentation, we structure the article as a succes-

---

1 Some authors prefer to use the term "social memory" (Laurens and Roussiau 2002), paralleling the distinction between the Durkheim-ian concept of collective representations and the concept of social representation proposed by Serge Moscovici (1961 [1976]).

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

49

sion of issues that we address with reference to both studies, rather than presenting each separately.

3. Different Emotions and Support for Reparative Action

In our Three-Generation Study (as opposed to the Two-Generation Study, see below), we asked French-speaking Belgian undergraduate psychology students to fill in a questionnaire about Belgian colonial activities in the Congo (n = 178; mean age = 20).[2] Then they were asked to administer the same questionnaire to one of their parents (n = 171; mean age = 49), and to one of their grandparents (n = 152; mean age = 74).[3] The questionnaire included measures of collective guilt and of support for reparative action for the Congolese. Collective guilt has been widely studied in social psychological research on intergroup conflicts and reconciliation processes (Branscombe and Doosje 2004). This emotion can be experienced "by association" for actions committed by other in-group members, often in the past. According to Branscombe (2004), it is a self-focused and aversive emotion that people usually seek to avoid, but which can lead to positive actions towards victims in order to repair the harm done to them. We measured it through a set of four nine-point items such as: "As a Belgian, I feel guilty about what happened in the Congo" or "As a Belgian, I feel regret when I think about what the Belgian administration and Belgian colonials did to the Congolese during the colonial period" (α = .79). Intergenerational comparisons (between-subjects comparisons) on this measure show that students (M = 4.34) reported significantly more collective guilt than grandparents (M = 3.70), with parents standing in-between (M = 4.04. F (2, 500) = 4.32; p = .01). This finding is in line with earlier observations suggesting that people directly involved in collective traumatic events tend to feel less guilt than later generations (Dresler-Hawke and Liu 2006; Marques, Paez, and Serra 1997; Paez et al. 2006).

We also asked them to express their degree of support for symbolic and material reparation: "I believe that the Belgian government should publicly apologize for its actions under colonialism" and "I believe that the Belgian government should offer financial compensation to the Congolese for its actions under colonialism" (α = .76). Again, students (M = 5.78) were significantly more in favor of reparation than their grandparents (M = 3.66), with parents similarly occupying an intermediate but distinct position (M = 5.02. F (2, 500) = 36.14; p < .001); symbolic reparation was supported more strongly than financial compensation in all groups.

As argued previously, these differences in collective guilt and support for reparation could be due to differences in socialization between the generations. In that case, we should observe differences in the way people learned about colonialism as a function of their generation. And representations of the colonial past should also be different. Finally, differences in representations should explain differences in collective guilt and support for reparation.

4. Different Ways of Learning about Colonialism

Another of our studies—carried out with Cristina Stanciu (2003)—investigated the way in which members of two generations were taught about colonialism. A questionnaire was administered to French-speaking Belgian undergraduate psychology students (n = 64; mean age = 24) and to a sample of members of a senior citizens' association (n = 54; mean age = 69). We will refer to it as the Two-Generation Study.[4] The first question asked whether or not they had been taught about colonialism at school. About half of the participants in both groups answered that they had (51.9 percent of the retired people; 45.3 percent of the students. $X^2 (1) = .5; n. s.$). So there was no significant difference in exposure to this theme at school. Then we asked participants who had answered the first question positively how detailed this teaching was, on an eleven-point scale ranging from 1 (very superficial) to 11 (very detailed). The retired people

---

2 Both studies were carried out with French-speaking participants. These data therefore infer nothing about how Dutch-speaking participants would have answered the same questions.

3 Participants self-completed their questionnaire, which is a potential source of bias (Richardson et al. 2006). However, the questionnaire was specially designed for self-completion, to avoid known biases. Questionnaires were carefully scrutinized and incomplete or inconsistent responses were discarded.

4 Gender had no significant effect on any of the variables of interest, and is therefore excluded from the discussion.

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

50

reported having received slightly more detailed information about colonialism ($M = 3.75$) than students ($M = 3.21$), but the difference was not significant ($t (55) = 1.17$; *n. s.*). They were also asked to what extent this teaching conveyed a negative or positive image of colonialism. Retired people reported having been taught a significantly more positive image ($M = 6.56$) than the students ($M = 5.07$. $t (56) = 2.82$; $p < .01$). These results suggest that exposure to information about colonialism did not change dramatically between these two generations, and that the information was not quantitatively different, but they do show that the valence changed from positive to more negative representations of colonialism.

Results from the Three-Generation Study allow the effects of the information to be evaluated more closely. One of the questions asked participants to rate how informed they felt about the colonization of the Congo, on a nine-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much). This time grandparents ($M = 5.38$) felt more informed than students ($M = 3.60$), with parents standing in-between ($M = 4.85$. $F (2, 496) = 30.06$; $p < .001$).[5] This suggests that sources of information other than schooling might account for the difference. More revealingly, we examined the correlations between this variable (feeling informed) and emotions (collective guilt and pride). It turns out that, among grandparents, feeling informed correlates positively with pride ($r (152) = .46$; $p < .001$) and negatively with collective guilt ($r (152) = -.19$; $p < .05$), whereas among the students it correlates positively with collective guilt ($r (178) = .18$; $p < .05$). Feeling informed also correlates positively with pride among the parents ($r (167) = .22$; $p < .01$). This result suggests that information on colonialism is interpreted in radically different ways in different generations.

5. Different Representations of Colonialism

In the Two-Generations Study, participants were asked to rate their agreement with a series of traits applied to King Leopold II. A principal components factor analysis revealed a two-factor structure accounting for 57.3 percent of the

variance. After a Varimax rotation, one factor included positive traits: humanism, generosity, patriotism, visionary king, philanthropy, love of the Congo, and altruism, while a second included negative traits: greed, megalomania, and cruelty. Comparing factor scores on these two dimensions shows how strikingly differently this emblematic figure of colonialism is perceived in the two generation groups: students view him as greedy, megalomaniac, and cruel ($M = .28$), and reject his positive traits ($M = -.18$), whereas the retired emphasize his positive traits ($M = .21$) and reject his negative ones ($M = -.34$). A Mixed Anova with the two factors as a within-subject factor and age group as a between-subjects factor revealed a significant interaction ($F (1, 116) = 17.29$; $p < .001$), but no main effects.

In the Three-Generation Study, towards the end of the questionnaire, participants were invited to let us know what they had in mind when answering the previous questions. They were asked to rate the extent to which they had thought about a series of items describing different aspects of colonialism on nine-point scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much). This set of items gives us access to participants' representations of colonialism. A principal components analysis was again carried out. It led to a two-factor structure accounting for 62 percent of the variance. The first factor, labeled "exploitation," included the following items: forced labor, exploitation of the Congolese, racial segregation, mutilations, massacres, and exploitation of natural resources for profit. The second factor, "development," comprised building the educational system, hospitals, roads, and economic infrastructure, and the work of churches and missionaries. The factor scores were saved, and mean scores on each of them were compared between the three generation samples. A Mixed Anova with these two factors as a within-subject factor and generation group (students, parents, grandparents) as a between-subjects factor yielded a main effect of generation group ($F (1, 478) = 7.86$; $p < .001$) as well as a significant interaction ($F (2, 478) = 45.72$; $p < .001$). Students thought largely in terms of exploitation ($M = .20$), and rejected the development dimension of colonial-

---

5 Degrees of freedom vary as a function of the number of participants who failed to answer some of the questions.

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

51

ism (M = -.52). In contrast, grandparents mainly mentioned the positive development aspects (M = .36), and rejected the exploitation aspects (M = -.28). Parents stood in-between the other two generation groups on the exploitation (M = .04) and development (M = .24) factors.

We examined correlations between the representation variables and collective guilt. Collective guilt correlates positively with the exploitation factor (among the three generation groups, r (*178, 164, 144*)= .35 .42, and .46 for students, parents, and grandparents, respectively; all ps < .001), but does not correlate negatively with the other two factors. This suggests that negative representations tend to trigger this negative emotion, whereas positive representations do not efficiently shelter individuals from it.

Through another set of items we measured how participants perceived the role of the Belgians during the decolonization process. Three items depicted the decolonization process as the abandonment of the Congolese by the Belgians: "The Belgians abandoned the Congolese during decolonization," "During decolonization the Belgians behaved in a cowardly way," and "The Belgians did not adequately prepare the Congolese for independence" (α = .64). Previous interviews with former colonials (Licata and Klein 2005) had revealed that this representation was prevalent among them. We found no significant mean differences between the three generation groups when comparing them on a variable averaging these three items. But when we entered both the exploitation and abandonment factors as predictors in a multiple linear regression (one for each generation group) we found that representing colonialism in terms of exploitation remains a significant predictor of collective guilt in all three groups (β = .32 (students), .39 (parents) and .39 (grandparents); ps all < .001, all βs standardized). However, believing that the Belgians abandoned the Congolese significantly induces collective guilt among the grandparents (β = .27; p < .01), and marginally significantly among the parents (β = .14; p = .06), but not among the students.[6]

Two conceptions of morality seem to be involved in these generations. In the Three-Generation Study we asked participants how moral or immoral they judged colonialism to have been through two items: "The colonial system implemented by the Belgian administration in the Congo was morally reprehensible" and "The colonial system implemented by the Belgian administration in the Congo was broadly acceptable, from a moral point of view" (reversed. α = .82). As expected, students judged it very immoral (M = 6.30), grandparents judged it far less immoral (M = 4.61), and parents again expressed an intermediate position (M = 5.59) that differed from the other two groups (F (2, 496) = 27.39; p < .001). What is more, we found that collective guilt was triggered by different factors in the two groups: students felt guilty because their group had committed illegitimate actions against an out-group (exploitation). Grandparents felt guilty when they believed colonialism had been illegitimate, but also because Belgium had abandoned the Congolese, i.e., for its withdrawal from the colony. Moral judgement can thus be envisioned as based on responsibility for past misdeeds (students) or on transgression of a paternalistic duty (grandparents).

In order to check whether the difference in collective guilt between the three generations could be explained by the difference we found in representations about colonialism, we performed a mediation analysis. We first regressed collective guilt on generation (1 = students; 2 = parents, and 3 = grandparents) and found, as expected, that generation negatively predicted collective guilt: the older the generation, the less guilt is expressed, although the effect is quite small (β = -.13; p < .01). Next we verified that generation negatively predicted scores on the exploitation factor (β = -.19; p < .001), and that the exploitation factor positively predicted collective guilt (β = .43; p < .001). Then we regressed collective guilt on the two other variables (generation and exploitation). This way, exploitation still significantly predicted collective guilt (β = .42; p < .001), whereas the direct effect of generation on collective guilt was no longer

---

6 Students: F (2, 167) = 10.67; p < .001, adjusted R^2 = .10. Parents: F (2, 158) = 19.76; p < .001, adjusted R^2 = .19. Grandparents: F (2, 140) = 29.79; p < .001, adjusted R^2 = .29.

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

52

significant (β = -.04; p = .29). The result was confirmed by a test of mediation (Sobel's z = 3.96; p < .001). This suggests that the difference in collective guilt we observed between the three generations can be explained, at least partially, through the difference in the representations of colonialism as a function of generation.

These results tend to confirm an explanation in terms of the different socialization patterns experienced by the three groups. However, this does not rule out a second explanation in terms of the present identity functions of collective memories.

6. Different Identity Functions

The pioneering study on collective guilt by Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, and Manstead (1998) shows that those who identified strongly with their country (high identifiers) expressed less collective guilt than low identifiers when confronted with an ambiguous description of the Netherlands' colonial past. They argue that, in line with social identity theory (Tajfel et al. 1986), high identifiers protect their social identity from these negative aspects and therefore do not experience collective guilt, whereas low identifiers are less motivated to protect national identity and therefore felt this unpleasant emotion.

This could explain the intergenerational difference in collective guilt that we observed, provided that levels of national identification do indeed vary across generations. We compared levels of national identification in the Three-Generation Study. As expected, grandparents identify significantly more strongly with Belgium (M = 6.68) than parents (M = 5.20) or grandchildren (M = 5.02. F (2, 497) = 40.55; p < .001). Levels of identification differed in the same way in the Two-Generation Study, with retired people expressing higher levels of identification (M = 7.4) than students (M = 5.8. t (116) = 4.70; p < .001). However, Belgian identification did not show a linear relationship with collective guilt in any of the three groups.[7]

We then checked whether national identification was related to representations of the colonial past. In the Two-Generation Study we compared correlations between national identification and the two factors of representations of King Leopold II. We found a positive correlation between national identification and the positive representation (r (54) = .31; p < .05), and a negative correlation between national identification and the negative representation of the king (r (54) = .30; p < .05) among the retired participants, but no significant correlation among the students.

In the Three-Generation Study we also found a positive correlation between national identification and the civilization factor (r (155) = .19; p < .05) and a negative correlation with the exploitation factor (r (155) = -.17; p < .05) among the grandparents, but no significant correlation was obtained among the students and the parents. The negative representations of colonialism expressed by the students seem to be independent of national identification. As a conclusion, it appears that the social identity protection function of collective memories can only be applied to the oldest generation. Students' representations seem to be generally negative, independently of their level of national identification.

7. Dealing with Collective Guilt: Avoidance or Reparation

As stated above, collective guilt is an aversive emotion. In order to avoid it, people may refer to what Roccas, Klar, and Liviatan label "exonerating cognitions" (2004), i.e., ideas that tend to lessen the moral implications of past group actions. In their studies of the Israeli-Palestinian relations, they found that blaming the victims or minimizing the events (the forced evacuation of Palestinians in 1948) proved efficient.

In the Three-Generation Study we included a set of thirteen exonerating cognitions items suggested by previous interviews with former colonials (Licata and Klein 2005). A principal component analysis revealed a three-factor structure accounting for 60.89 percent of the variance. The first factor

---

7 Further investigation showed that the relationship between Belgian identification and collective guilt was quadratic, with an inverted U-shaped curve, suggesting that only middle identifiers expressed collective guilt, and that the relationship did not significantly vary as a function of generation group (see Klein, Licata, and Pierucci 2010).

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

53

includes items relating to the benevolence and morality of the Belgians' behavior during colonization, such as: "Overall, the Belgians behaved very humanely in the Congo" and "During the colonial period, Belgians often behaved in an immoral way with the Congolese." We refer to this factor as virtuous colonialism. The second factor is composed of four items evoking the difference between today's values and those that were typical of the colonial times, for example: "One cannot judge colonial actions by today's values" and "The colonials and the Belgian administration only followed the spirit of their times." This moral relativist stance could allow the illegitimacy of colonial actions to be relativized by modifying moral standards and suggesting that one cannot judge the colonials' behavior by today's standards. Finally, the third factor covered two items about the representativeness of the colonials: "During the colonial period, the behavior of the colonials and the Belgian administration were broadly representative of the will of the Belgian people at that time" and "The colonials were not really representative of the Belgians in general" (negative loading). Unrepresentativeness is a sub-typing strategy: by stressing that only a sub-category of the in-group was involved in colonialism, participants preserve a positive image of the group and thus avoid experiencing negative emotions.

Multiple regression analyses were carried out with these four exonerating cognitions variables as predictors and collective guilt as the dependent variable. The results show that different kinds of exonerating cognitions are at work in the three groups. Virtuous colonialism proved to be an efficient negative predictor of collective guilt among the grandparents (β = -.57; p < .001) and the parents (β = -.30; p < .001), but not among the students (β = -.09; p = .24). Moral relativism also negatively predicted collective guilt among the parents (β = -.30; p < .001) and the grandparents (although only with marginal significance, β = -.14; p = .06), but not among the students (β = -.11; p = .15). Finally, representativeness significantly affected collective guilt among the students (β =.22; p < .01), but not among the parents (β

= .03; p = .64) or the grandparents (β = -.07; p = .35). The more students viewed colonial actions as representative of the whole Belgian population, the more collective guilt they experienced.

To sum up: The three generation groups employ distinct strategies to avoid collective guilt. Grandparents and parents tend to avoid collective guilt by legitimizing colonial actions, either by stressing their inherent morality or by delegitimizing negative judgments by stressing the different moral standards applying to colonials at the time. By contrast, students feel less collective guilt when they believe that the colonials were not representative of the Belgian population, thus protecting their national identity. It is worth noting, though, that this model tends to predict only a small proportion of variance among the students.[8]

Another way to deal with collective guilt is to face the immorality of the in-group's past actions, experience the negative emotion, and engage in behavior aimed at repairing the harm. Accordingly, collective guilt correlated positively with support for reparation – both symbolic and material – in the three groups (students: r (178) = .32; p < .001; parents: r (167) = .51; p < .001; grandparents: r (156) = .52; p < .001).

8. Political Positioning

Political positioning on a left to right continuum – on a nine-point scale ranging from 1 (very left-wing) to 9 (very right-wing) – also varied as a function of generation, with the students holding more left-wing positions (M = 3.93) than parents (M = 4.48) and grandparents (M = 4.79. F (2. 465) = 10.09, p < .001). Political positioning correlated positively with national identification in the three groups (r (169) = .28, p < .001; r (155) = .16, p <.05; r (141) = .19, p < .05 for students, parents, and grandparents respectively). In addition, it correlated negatively with collective guilt among the parents (r (155) = -.35, p < .001) and grandparents (r (141) = -.29, p < .001), but not the students (r (170) = -.11, p = .14), and it correlated negatively with support for repara-

---

8 Students: F (3, 164) = 4.48; p < .01, adjusted R^2 = .06. Parents: F (3, 157) = 11.53; p < .001, adjusted R^2 = .17. Grandparents: F (3, 140) = 22.61; p < .001, adjusted R^2 = .33.

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

54

tion among all three groups, especially among the parents (r (170) = -.26, p = .001; r (155) = -.51, p < .001; r (141) = -.28, p < .001 for students, parents, and grandparents respectively). However, multiple regression analyses carried out in the three groups show that collective guilt still significantly predicts support for reparation after controlling for the effect of political orientation (βs = .30, .33, and .48 for students, parents, and grandparents respectively; all ps < .001), suggesting that expressing collective guilt is not just another way to take a political position.

9. Discussion

The studies we report here tend to confirm the hypothesis that differences in levels of collective guilt and support for reparative actions towards the former colonized can be traced back to important differences in socialization between the generations. Grandparents grew up in a largely pro-colonial ideological environment. At school they learned that colonialism was a positive enterprise that benefited both the colonizers and the colonized. The more informed they feel about colonialism, the more they are proud of Belgium's colonial action. This is not surprising as we also found that their representations of colonialism were predominantly positive: they emphasize the importance of the civilizing mission and of the material, infrastructure, health, and educational development of the colony, but downplay the negative aspects of colonialism (exploitation, racism, atrocities). They also hold a very positive view of King Leopold II. By contrast, the young generation grew up in a much more critical ideological environment. They only remember the worst aspects of colonialism, perceive the colonial king as a cruel megalomaniac, and report guilt to the extent that they feel informed about colonialism. The middle generation consistently occupies an intermediate position between these two generation groups, suggesting that the trend is progressive. These results are highly compatible with the idea that collective memory depends on the social frameworks in which the historical events or periods were memorized (Schuman et al. 1997). These memories form during adolescence and early adulthood, and remain relatively stable over time.

However, this observation does not refute our second hypothesis, which refers to the current identity functions

of collective memories. We consistently found that our measure of national identification significantly affected representations of colonialism (and of King Leopold II) among the oldest generation. By contrast, students' answers on these variables were largely unaffected by their level of national identification. To sum up, grandparents generally held more positive representations of colonialism but this was modulated by their level of national identification: the more they identified, the more they held positive representations of colonialism. By contrast, students held negative representations independently of their level of national identification. As a conclusion, our functional hypothesis, derived from social identity theory, that collective memories and collective emotions serve identity-protecting functions, can only be verified for the older generation (and, to a lesser extent, for the parents). How could that be explained?

So far, our analyses have been predicated upon the assumption that guilt is an individual emotion. It can be viewed as collective because it derives from shared representations and from a common group membership. But we can take this idea a step further and wonder whether guilt has become *normative*. Some have described a general tendency for Western societies to engage in repentance (Paez 2010; Barkan 2000). This thesis was put forward recently by French philosopher Pascal Bruckner in his bestselling anti-collective-guilt pamphlet, *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism* (2010). He suggests that after the mass killings of colonialism and two world wars European nations have developed a "culture of guilt" that involves admitting all past misdeeds in order to maintain a positive self-image as more "moral" than other countries. One of the functions of this "culture of guilt" is to demonstrate inner morality and to differentiate oneself from "immoral" others. Bruckner's thesis is probably overblown, with its sweeping condemnation of European nations' policies of public apology and reparation for their former victims, whereas evidence is available showing that they can have positive effects on members of both former victim groups (Blatz, Schumann, and Ross 2009) and former perpetrator groups (Lastrego and Licata 2010; see Paez 2010 for a review). But Bruckner usefully draws our attention to the normative nature of collective guilt and its identity function. Those who express guilt about their past misdeeds are viewed positively. Thus,

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

55

expressing guilt might be a way to affirm a social identity as "tolerant." Similarly, findings of research using the minimal group paradigm suggest that one social differentiation strategy ironically involves being "fairer than the others" (Jetten, Spears, and Manstead 1996). This could help us explain why students express high levels of collective guilt. In the present situation, collective memories of colonialism do not serve the function of protecting national identity by presenting a glorious past; these memories tend to be expressed as a means to display conformity to the current social norms, which indirectly casts a positive light on one's own identity. Research on "social identity performance" (Klein, Spears, and Reicher 2007) suggests that people sometimes engage in purposeful acts of identity expression that cannot be explained only in terms of specific internal representations but are also strategic moves aimed at influencing audiences in particular ways, either to "verify" (consolidate) social identity or to mobilize audiences into engaging in specific behaviors (Klein and Licata 2003).

This normative dimension of collective memories can thus help us account for the way the colonial past is represented among generation groups. Integrating a past event into the identity narrative of a group plays a role in defining the values and norms that this group intends to adopt in the present and in the future (Liu and Hilton 2005). In this case, the colonial past is perceived as incompatible with the group's current identity. On the contrary, it now appears necessary to establish distance from these events, to construe a critical representation of them. Among Belgian students, the whole representation of the colonial past seems to be affected by the violation of human rights associated with the Leopoldian period (1885–1908). Conversely, grandparents project their benevolent representation of Belgian colonialism (1908–1960) onto the whole colonial history of the Congo, including the Leopoldian period. This explains why we observed that students feel guilty for the immoral actions committed during the colonial period, whereas grandparents also feel guilty for having abandoned the Congolese. For students, colonialism actually serves as an antithesis in the group's identity narrative. In the same way as a historical example that is seen as edifying can be presented in an exclusively positive manner in order to symbolize the best of the group's values, a historical antithesis can be presented in an even more negative way to better highlight the qualities that group members wish to appropriate.

The example of the severed bronze hand with which we began this article would seem to obey this logic. However, the Ostend anarchists demand not the destruction of the monument to the glory of Leopold II (which would fit the notion of oblivion), but that a critical comment be added to it to point out the incompatibility of Leopold's colonial acts with today's values. That would change the monument's identity-related assertion from "We are a nation that colonized another for its own good" to "We are a nation that unfairly colonized another, but we have learned the critical lessons of that experience."[9]

---

9 Although we cannot, of course, condone the method used to convey the message.

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

56

References

Barkan, Elazar. 2000. *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Bartlett, Frederic Charles. 1932. *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Baumeister, Roy F., and Stephen Hastings. 1997. Distortions of Collective Memory: How Groups Flatter and Deceive Themselves. In *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. J. W. Pennebaker, D. Paez, and B. Rimé. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Blatz, Craig W, Karina Schumann, and Michael Ross. 2009. Government Apologies for Historical Injustices. *Political Psychology* 30 (2): 219–41.

Branscombe, Nyla R. 2004. A Social Psychological Process Perspective on Collective Guilt. In *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives*, ed. N. B. Branscombe and B. Doosje. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Branscombe, Nyla R., and Bertjan Doosje. 2004. *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives*, Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bruckner, Pascal. 2010. *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism*, trans. Steven Rendall. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Coman, Alin, Adam D. Brown, Jonathan Koppel, and William Hirst. 2009. Collective Memory from a Psychological Perspective. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 22 (2): 125–41.

Conrad, Joseph. 1902. *Youth, a Narrative, and Two Other Stories*. Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood and Sons.

Conway, Martin A., and Christopher W. Pleydell-Pearce. 2000. The Construction of Autobiographical Memories in the Self-Memory System. *Psychological Review* 107 (2): 261–88.

De Coninck, Douglas. 2005. Een zaagske, een beitelke. *De Morgen*, 16 April.

Doosje, Bertjan, Nyla R. Branscombe, Russell Spears, and Antony S. R. Manstead. 1998. Guilty by Association: When One's Group Has a Negative History. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 75 (4): 872–86.

Dresler-Hawke, Emma, and James H. Liu. 2006. Collective Shame and the Positioning of German National Identity. *Psicologia Politica* 32: 131–53.

Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Halbwachs, Maurice. 1980. *The Collective Memory*. 1st ed, Harper colophon books CN/800. New York: Harper & Row.

Halbwachs, Maurice, and Lewis A. Coser. 1992. *On Collective Memory*, The Heritage of Sociology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hochschild, Adam. 1998. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Jackman, Mary R. 1994. *The Velvet Glove: Paternalism and Conflict in Gender, Class, and Race Relations*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.

Jetten, Jolanda, Russel Spears, and Anthony S. R. Manstead. 1996. Intergroup Norms and Intergroup Discrimination: Distinctive Self-Categorization and Social Identity Effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71: 1222–33.

Klein, Olivier, and Laurent Licata. 2003. When Group Representations Serve Social Change: The Speeches of Patrice Lumumba During the Congolese Decolonization. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 42 (4): 571–93.

Klein, Olivier, Laurent Licata, and Sabrina Pierucci. 2010. *Does Identification Facilitate or Prevent Collective Guilt About Past Misdeeds? Resolving the Paradox*. Unpublished manuscript. Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels.

Klein, Olivier, Russell Spears, and Stephen D. Reicher. 2007. Social Identity Performance: Extending the Strategic Side of SIDE. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 11 (1): 28–45.

Lastrego, Simona, and Laurent Licata. 2010. Should a Country's Leaders Apologize for its Past Misdeeds? *Revista de Psicología Social* 25:61–72.

Laurens, Stéphane, and Nicolas Roussiau, eds. 2002. *La mémoire sociale: Identités et représentations sociales*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.

Licata, Laurent, and Olivier Klein. 2005. Regards croisés sur un passé commun: anciens colonisés et anciens coloniaux face à l'action belge au Congo. In *L'Autre: regards psychosociaux*, ed. M. Sanchez-Mazas and L. Licata. Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.

Licata, Laurent, Olivier Klein, and Raphaël Gély. 2007. Mémoire des conflits, conflits de mémoires: Une approche psychosociale et philosophique du rôle de la mémoire collective dans les processus de réconciliation intergroupe. *Social Science Information* 46 (4): 563–89.

Licata, Laurent, Olivier Klein, and Chloé Gurrieri. In press. Mémoire de bronze, mémoire de caoutchouc: Un regard psychosocial sur les représentations de l'action coloniale belge au Congo. In *Belgique-Congo: Enjeux d'histoire, enjeux de mémoire*, ed. C. Kesteloot and R. Van Doorslaer. Brussels: CEGES.

Liu, James H., and Denis J. Hilton. 2005. How the Past Weighs on the Present: Social Representations of History and their Role in Identity Politics. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 44 (4): 537–56.

Loomba, Ania. 2005. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 2d ed., The New Critical Idiom. London and New York: Routledge.

Marechal, Philippe. 2005. La controverse sur Léopold II et le Congo dans la littérature et les médias: Réflexions critiques. In *La mémoire du Congo: le temps colonial*, ed. J.-L. Vellut. Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale.

Marques, José M., Dario Paez, and Alexandra F. Serra. 1997. Social Sharing, Emotional Climate, and the Transgenerational Transmission of Memories: The Portuguese Colonial War. In *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. J. W. Pennebaker, D. Paez, and B. Rimé. Manwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Memmi, Albert. 1965. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 1st American ed. New York: Orion Press.

Morel, Edmund D. 1906. *Red Rubber: The Story of the Rubber Slave Trade Flourishing on the Congo in the Year of Grace 1906*. London: Fisher and Unwin.

Moscovici, Serge. 1961 [1976]. *La psychanalyse, son image et son public*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Ndaywel è Nziem, Isidore. 2005. Le Congo et le bon usage de son histoire. In *La mémoire du Congo: le temps colonial*, ed. J.-L. Vellut. Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale.

Olick, Jeffrey K. 1999. Collective Memory: The Two Cultures. *Sociological Theory* 17 (3): 333–48.

Paez, Dario. 2010. Official or Political Apologies and Improvement of Intergroup Relations: A Neo-Durkheimian Approach to Official Apologies as Rituals. *Revista de Psicología Social* 25: 101–15.

Paez, Dario, José M. Marques, Jose Valencia, and Orsolya Vincze. 2006. Dealing with Collective Shame and Guilt. *Psicologia Politica* 32: 59–78.

Richardson, S. Clive, Kyriaki Politikou, Marina Terzidou, Zoe Maka, and Anna Kokkevi. 2006. The Quality of Data Obtained from Self-Completed Questionnaires in a Survey of High School Students. *Quality and Quantity* 40 (1): 121–27.

Roccas, Sonia, Yechiel Klar, and Ido Liviatan. 2004. Exonerating Cognitions, Group Identification, and Personal Values as Predictors of Collective Guilt among Jewish-Israelis. In *Collective Guilt: International Perspectives*, ed. N. B. Branscombe and B. Doosje. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

IJCV : Vol. 4 (1) 2010, pp. 45 – 57
Licata and Klein: Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?

57

Schuman, Howard, Robert F. Belli, and Katherine Bischoping. 1997. The Generational Basis of Historical Knowledge. In *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. J. W. Pennebaker, D. Paez, and B. Rimé. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Schuman, Howard, and Willard L. Rodgers. 2004. Cohorts, Chronology, and Collective Memories. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 68 (2): 217.

Stanciu, Cristina. 2003. Mémoire collective de la colonisation: comparaison intergénérationnelle des représentations de l'action belge au Congo. Final project, Université libre de bruxelles, Bruxelles.

Tajfel, Henry, and John C. Turner. 1986. The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior. In *The Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. S. Worchel and W. G. Austin. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

van Ypersele, Laurence. 2006. Les mémoires collectives. In *Questions d'histoire contemporaine: Conflits, mémoires et identités*, ed. by L. van Ypersele. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Vellut, Jean-Luc. 2005. Regards sur le temps colonial. In *La mémoire du Congo: le temps colonial*, ed. J.-L. Vellut. Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale.

Wertsch, James V., and Henry L. Roediger. 2008. Collective Memory: Conceptual Foundations and Theoretical Approaches. *Memory* 16 (3): 318–26.

Young, Robert J. C. 2001. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Laurent Licata
licata@ulb.ac.be

Olivier Klein
oklein@ulb.ac.be