Social representations of colonialism in Africa and in Europe: Structure and relevance for contemporary intergroup relations

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ABSTRACT

European colonial powers invaded and then dominated a large part of the African continent from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. The influence of colonialism did not cease after independence as it still impregnates the cultures and identities of both formerly colonising and formerly colonised peoples. The question of how inhabitants of formerly colonised and formerly colonising countries represent the colonial past is a key issue in understanding this lasting influence. Social representations of European colonial action were investigated among young people (\(N = 1134\)) in three European countries and six African countries. Social representations of colonialism denoted by Exploitation were more strongly endorsed by the European compared to the African subsample, whereas those denoted by Development were more strongly endorsed by the African compared to the European subsample. However, while African participants considered colonialism less negatively than Europeans, they also had higher expectations concerning Europeans' collective guilt feeling and willingness to offer reparations. By contrast, European participants' social representations of colonialism were more negative but they were less likely to believe that present-day European peoples and governments are accountable for the misdeeds of colonialism in the past. Finally, national identification mediated the association between the Exploitation dimension of colonialism and both group-based emotions and support for reparation in the African, but not the European, subsample.

Introduction

"Today, it is still not clear to everyone that black slavery and colonial atrocities are part of the world's memory; even less that that memory, because of its shared nature, is not the property of the sole peoples who were victims of these events, but of humanity as a whole; or even that as long as we are unable to take responsibility for the memories of the 'Whole-World', it will be impossible to imagine what could be a truly shared world, a truly universal humanity" (Mbembe, 2016; p. 1041)
According to Merle (2003), Westerners have experienced a shift of attitude regarding colonialism: when first introduced, people perceived it as a positive act (to some extent as a humanitarian project), then they started to perceive it more negatively, and finally tended to consider it as horrific. As Mbembe’s quote powerfully illustrates, the colonial experience still deeply affects formerly colonising and colonised peoples, though the peak of colonisation has passed. The difficulties in defining and representing the colonial past contribute to political tensions both within formerly colonising and formerly colonised nations, and between these countries at the international level. Disagreement over how the colonial past should be interpreted has created various political and diplomatic tensions in Europe and overseas. For example, in France in 2005, a right-wing party tried to put forward a new law (Law n°2005-158 of 23 February 2005, article 4) acknowledging the positive aspects and contributions of French colonialism in history textbooks. The project sparked strong reactions from both French historians and from inhabitants of French overseas territories and consequently the law was modified (Boilley, 2015). Belgium as well has a long history of controversies over its colonial past. For instance, in 2008, the former foreign minister of Belgium was banned from the Democratic Republic of Congo during an official visit as his speech was deemed “neo-colonialist” by the DRC’s president (Vidal, 2008). Even Portugal, which has claimed a rather different position from other formerly colonising countries, cannot avoid discordant representations of the colonial past (Valentim, 2003, 2011). As explained by Castelo (1999); see also Vala, Lopes, & Lima, 2008; Valentim, 2011; Valentim & Heleno, 2017), the Salazar dictatorship used Luso-tropicalism theory (originally coined by Freyre, 1945) to legitimize its colonies. This theory suggests that the Portuguese have a particular empathy toward the “so-called inferior races” (p. 185) and consequently infers that harmonious and benevolent intergroup relations were experienced in Portuguese colonies. This assumption is still defended by some Portuguese citizens, although it is not shared by African students from former Portuguese colonies studying in Portugal (Valentim, 2003, 2011).

Disagreement over how colonialism should be presented has also brought animated debates among intellectuals. Although Western literature in the 19th and 20th centuries strongly defended a positive view of it (Said, 1993), postcolonial (Young, 2001) and decolonial (Mignolo, 2011) scholars present a rather negative image of this history. They hold colonialism accountable for present-day political injustices, which still disadvantage former colonies. In brief, social representations of colonialism correspond to what Moscovici (1988) named “polemic social representations”: social representations that were formed within different subgroups in the context of a conflict or controversy (for empirical evidence, see Kus, Liu & Ward, 2013). Similarly, we contend that colonialism arouses different social representations among inhabitants of formerly colonised and colonising countries. This might be due, on the one hand, to antagonist roles and perspectives adopted in the past and, on the other hand, to the different needs these representations are aimed to fulfill in the present (Rimé, Bouchat, Klein, & Licata, 2015; Wohl, Matheson, Branscombe, & Anisman, 2013).

The opposition between positive vs. negative social representations of colonialism described above could imply that social representations of colonialism are one-dimensional, structured by a simple opposition between its positive and negative aspects. However, Licata and Klein (2010) showed that social representations of colonialism held by Belgian participants across three generations were structured by two orthogonal dimensions, which they labelled exploitation and development. This suggests that social representations of colonialism are more complex than a simple binary opposition. Yet, these analyses were based on a single sample from a formerly colonising country; to date, there is no evidence that social representations of colonialism are structured along the same lines among inhabitants of different—formerly colonising or formerly colonised—countries.

Perception of the past, and its effect on attitudes and behavioural intentions in the present, is a topic that has received significant attention from social psychologists, who argue that social representations of history are a critical ingredient in the social construction of identities, as they impart understandings of the origins of groups and their relations with other groups (Liu and Hilton, 2005). Research has indeed shown that representations of the past induce collective emotions, which in turn inspire intergroup attitudes and behavioural intentions (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Iyer & Leach, 2008). History is thus a critical topic for the study of social representations. However, although a substantial body of research has examined the strategies and processes by which groups represent history (see Liu and Sibley, 2015; for a review), research into social representations of colonialism has attracted only scattered attention from social psychologists, who argue that social representations of history are a critical ingredient in the social construction of identities, as they impart understandings of the origins of groups and their relations with other groups (Liu and Hilton, 2005).

Given that ingroup favouritism is a basic component of group-based representations, we expect that nationals of formerly colonised countries will focus more on the negative aspects of colonialism than those of formerly colonising ones. Adopting different perspectives on the past has been shown to create difficult conditions for reconciliation (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005; Branscombe & Cronin, 2010). Thus we expect discordant social representations to induce discordant outcomes on how to deal with the consequences of the past.
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