The effect of Social dominance on prejudice towards North-African minorities: Evidence for the role of social representation of Secularism as a legitimizing myth

Jais Troian[a,*], Eric Bonetto[a], Florent Varet[b], Mathilde Barbier[a], Grégory Lo Monaco[a]

[a] Aix Marseille Univ, LPS, Aix-en-Provence, France
[b] IFSTTAR-TS2-LMA, 13300, Salon-de-Provence, France

A B S T R A C T

Secularism in France is both a state principle and a cultural construct, that enforces a State neutrality towards religion. Recent studies have demonstrated the emergence of a lay conception called 'New Secularism' (NS) that is used to legitimize expression of prejudice towards North African minorities. However, none have been able to yet demonstrate links between NS and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), which would further corroborate those beliefs' role as prejudice justification. Using Social Representations Theory, we created a Secularism questionnaire and used it in a cross sectional survey ($N = 261$) that also included SDO and Generalized Prejudice measures. In order to test social representation of Secularism's legitimizing function, we derived the hypothesis that NS will mediate the link between SDO and expressed Prejudice from a Social Dominance perspective. Results support our predictions and are discussed in light of intergroup status quo legitimization processes and their links with social representations.

Introduction

Secularism in France (known as '*laïcité*') refers to a state principle first established with a 1905 law 'On the separation between State and Cults'. According to secularism, the French State and its servants must remain neutral towards religion (i.e., not to display visible religious signs) in order to allow for individual freedom of religion. This principle may be thought as a form of State 'secularity' (for a more accurate depiction, see Akan, 2009).

It must be noted that this definition is a legal one, but how can we then explain rising ethnic tensions and prejudice toward north African minorities that seem to be more and more justified by appealing to secularism? How is secularism reconstructed by the French and to what purpose? Could it deserve ideological goals, such as *status quo* maintenance? These are some of the issues this paper will try to answer.

Emergence of 'New Secularism'

As noted by historians throughout the past decades (e.g., Baubérot, 2010, 2014), this traditional understanding of secularism has been gradually replaced in everyday life. This 'New Secularism' (NS, also referred to as 'counterfeited secularism') has emerged among the public, media and political discourse: now, individuals ought to be *laic* and religious signs shall not be seen in the public

sphere. These two conceptions of secularism have been recently confirmed by Roebroeck and Guimond (2017). Departing from a 'positive' logic of liberty (Berlin, 1958), NS's fundamental logic has become one of restriction and social control (Vauchez & Valentin, 2014) according to which one's religion should remain private. Thus, the principle of neutrality legally attributed to the French State has been imputed to religions. This new conception of secularism was the basis for the 2004 act forbidding visible religious signs among pupils in French public schools. Though every religion falls under the scope of this law, it was implemented after more than a decade of heated debates surrounding the wearing of Muslim *hijab* by underage pupils. In fact, as Nugier, Roebroeck et al. (2016) report, '*one argument to justify this 2004 law was that it was needed to fight against Islamic fundamentalist movements*'. This has led researchers (e.g., Kamiejski, Guimond, De Oliveira, Er-Rafiy, & Brauer, 2012) to consider the possible function of NS as a socially acceptable justification for expressing intergroup prejudice (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002), namely anti-Muslim prejudice.

New Secularism and expression of prejudice

For their part, Kamiejski et al. (2012) created a scale designed to assess the adherence of French students to Republican Ideology. It refers to the 'French Republican model of integration and organization of community life […] model which aims at ensuring freedom, equality and brotherhood' (Kamiejski et al., 2012). Among the scale's two dimensions, a factor corresponding to NS (i.e., 'religious practice should remain as private as possible') was found. Subsequent correlational analyses revealed the NS factor to be positively linked with expression of prejudice towards people from North African descent. What is surprising here is that expressed prejudice has little to do with belonging to a religious group (Muslim) but to an ethnic one. Further studies confirmed positive correlations between NS and expressed prejudice towards North Africans (Guimond, de la Sablonnière, & Nugier, 2014), but also towards immigrants in general (Roebroeck & Guimond, 2015) among both students and the general population. Experimental corroboration of this phenomenon through manipulation of adherence to NS was conducted by Nugier, Oppin et al. (2016), whose results indicate that transgression of NS principles, such as wearing a visible religious sign in public, was more sanctioned when transgressors were Muslim than when they were Christian. Furthermore, individuals in the Muslim-target condition scored significantly higher on the NS subscale of the Republican Ideology Scale, indicating the justification potential of this construct.

Limitations of the republican ideology approach

Though very interesting in highlighting the effects of NS on expressed prejudice, we wanted to complement the above-mentioned approach on several important features. The first one has to do with methodological considerations regarding the Republican Ideology Scale (RIS). Indeed, three major concerns emerge regarding this scale's construction, validation and psychometric properties. When taking a closer look at how RIS was created, one cannot help noticing that items used to assess this construct were selected by researchers on the basis of a press review and legal definitions. This might explain the sometimes poor reliability of the NS subscale ($\alpha = .25$, Kamiejski et al., 2012, study 2), because those contents might not reflect the way Secularism is perceived by lay people. Also, RIS is a measure of Republican Ideology, which mixes a dimension regarding beliefs about French citizenship (called 'colorblind equality') with another one regarding secularism, but only in its 'new' version. Notwithstanding the different nature of these two components, individuals may also hold different beliefs regarding each of these components and may not fall in a simple dichotomy between 'citizenship equalitarians' and 'new laics'.

These methodological concerns point at more theoretical issues that need to be addressed. We agree with Nugier, Oppin et al. (2016), from a justification-suppression of prejudice perspective (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Crandall et al., 2002) and with their observation that NS helps to justify expression of prejudice. Furthermore, Imhoff and Recker (2012), study 2) observed that Secular Critique of Islam was correlated to prejudice toward Islam only for participants high in Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). If so, then a moderate to strong relation between NS and SDO is to be expected. This is because a higher endorsement of general *status quo* legitimizing myths should also be linked with endorsement of more culturally situated explanations for justifying derogation of outgroups (as would be the case for NS). In fact, from a Social Dominance perspective, beliefs of the NS kind can be considered as legitimizing myths that mediate the relationship between SDO (which is a general tendency to support the current status quo by adhering to legitimizing myths) and expressed prejudice (or support to anti-egalitarian policies; see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Hodson, Rush, & MacInnis, 2010).

However, from Kamiejski et al.'s (2012) study and on, no one has yet been able to consistently demonstrate such correlations by using NS subscale of the RIS. We argue that these negative results might be attributed to measurement problems. In light of these limitations, we offer to further assess these authors' hypothesis regarding the status of NS as a collective belief which has legitimizing properties, by drawing upon their work using more ecological material for measuring NS. This is why we turned to Social Representations Theory and methods.

Social representations approach

The concept of social representation (SR) was initially proposed by Moscovici (1961, 2008). SRs can be defined as structured systems of ideas, opinions, attitudes, and beliefs shared by a social group about a same social object (Keczer, File, Orosz, & Zimbardo, 2016; Rateau, Moliner, Guimelli, & Abric, 2011; Sammut et al., 2015). SRs constitute 'what people think of knowing and are persuaded to know about objects, about situations, about given groups' (Abric, 1996, p. 11). Especially, it focuses on the construction of a common vision of an object or a social issue through interpersonal interactions within a social group (Breakwell, 1993; Moscovici,