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Facing the unknown crimes of older generations: Emotional and cognitive reactions of young Italian students reading an historical text on the colonial invasion of Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

When victims are weak and isolated, social denial of crimes committed against them is a banal and often long-lasting phenomenon. Nevertheless, reactions to the breaking of denial on past wrongdoings is a scarcely studied issue. This experimental study explores reactions of forty-two Italian university students, when exposed to historical information on colonial crimes committed by the Italian Army against Ethiopians. Before the experimental task, participants proved to be ignorant of these historical facts, up until now literally denied in the Italian social discourse. The wording of a same historical text was manipulated in order to describe Italian colonial crimes either clearly (using words as “poisonous gas”) or in an implicit way (using words as “unconventional weapons”). When reading the historical text participants were unobtrusively observed. Immediately after reading the text and a week after reading it, participants self-assessed their cognitive and emotional reactions. A week after they self-assessed as well their self-conscious emotions of guilt, moral and social shame, their agreement with reparative actions, and their belief of the widespread social myth (Italiani Brava Gente, i.e. IBG) describing Italian people as good and harmless types. Results showed that 45.2 % of participants expressed primary negative emotions when reading. Participants exposed to the detailed text showed higher negative emotions and a higher level of moral shame. A week after reading, all participants unexpectedly showed a higher belief in IBG. A minority of participants declared to agree with reparative intentions; this agreement was associated with higher moral shame.

Introduction

Although located in a sometimes distant past, historical events may be felt as “psychologically contemporary” when they contribute towards explaining current intercultural relations and conflicts (Lewin, 1943). Colonial crimes belong to this category of remote yet psychologically contemporary historical event. Colonialism involved a large number of people all around the world and seems to be an essential piece of knowledge about the past, important for comprehending the dynamics of the contemporary world and understanding some of the roots of contemporary conflicts (Volpato & Licata, 2010). When the descendants of both former colonizers and those colonized react emotionally to events linked to colonial times, they indirectly, yet clearly, signal that these events are meaningful for their own current lives (Allpress, Barlow, Brown, & Louis, 2010), i.e. that these events are psychologically contemporary for them.

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There are several theoretical reasons for conceiving emotions as signals of the present-day relevance of past events. First of all, according to classic theories regarding emotions (Lazarus, 1991; Smith, 1993), events can trigger emotional experiences only when they have been appraised to be relevant, for either positive or negative reasons, and have been judged to be more or less under the individual's control. Secondly, according to the intergroup emotion theory (Mackie, Smith, & Ray, 2008), reacting emotionally to events that refer to the group in which one happens to be born, but that are completely unrelated to personal concerns and sometimes occurred before one's own birth, means that intergroup relations have become salient enough to shift people's attention from what "I" (as an individual) feel when facing events affecting my life, to what "we" (as members of a group) feel when facing events affecting our group's life. Finally, being based on intergroup relations instead of on personal concerns, emotions linked to group membership – in sharp contrast with the highly stable stereotypes and attitudes (Smith & Mackie, 2006) – show a large and sometimes dramatic over-time variability, being at the same time a key feature with which to understand the dynamics of intergroup relations as well as a basic driver of their interactions (Smith & Mackie, 2015).

In this article we aim to explore in greater depth a crucial yet understudied instance of this over-time variability of intergroup emotions, i.e. when people are confronted for the first time with in-group crimes that are factually denied (Cohen, 2001) in their current social discourse. We used the rarely investigated case study of colonial crimes committed by the Italian Army during the colonial invasion of Ethiopia (1935–1936) because these crimes are still unknown to and ignored by the large majority of Italian people, due to the widespread social censorship (Bar-Tal, 2017) of this period of the Italian past (Labanca, 2004). In a previous research (Leone & Sarrica, 2014) we built up two different historical narratives conveying this information, previously unknown to participants, expressing in a clear or in a more nuanced way how these colonial crimes committed during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia deserved a negative moral judgement, to investigate through a quasi-experimental procedure whether participants reacted with different intergroup emotions to these two communicative strategies on socially denied past in-group crimes, and whether these different reactions could influence their acknowledgment of the need for reparative initiatives toward the group of those former colonized. Reactions were collected both while reading the text to which each participant was randomly assigned, and immediately afterwards. Reparative intentions were also explored. Results showed that participants reacted not only to the new information received, but also to the way in which it was conveyed. More in particular, narrative not only conveying new information, but also frankly taking a moral stance on past violence (a strategy that we named, after classic works of Foucault, 1983, *parrhesia*) provoked an increase in negative group-based emotions. Interestingly, the intensity of all negative emotions increased when reading the text openly judging with *parrhesia* the moral violations of the Italian Army, with the exception of collective guilt, that did not differ between participants exposed to a clear or a more evasive text.

In this article, we have built upon this research. We organised another study aimed to advance our previous examination of the moment when the social denial on Italian colonial crimes during the Ethiopian invasion is broken down. In this second research we disentangled the conveying of historical information previously unknown to participants from the open expression of a moral judgement. Therefore for this second study we have built two new historical accounts, by manipulating the wording of a same text. These two accounts described historical facts in a clearer and detailed way or in a more implicit one, but did not explicitly express a moral stance on facts narrated. Through this new procedure we wanted to observe if and how participants, after reading the detailed account, would autonomously formulate their own moral judgement without being led to it, only by summing up the historical factual information received. We expected on the contrary that participants could not formulate such a moral judgement when receiving the historical information in a more implicit way. We wondered, in fact, whether a nuanced and non-explicit narrative describing facts that are socially denied, could render the information clear enough to be fully understood by receivers having no previous knowledge available in their everyday social discourse for grasping the actual meaning of such implicit information.

Starting from this different moral judgement on historical facts, we aimed at observing how participants emotions may unfold in time, changing from initial reactions directly observed during the reading of the narrative and immediately after it, to the more complex self-conscious emotions self-assessed after a week. According to Lewis (1971), self-conscious emotions develop from primary emotional reactions thanks to cognitive capacity applied both to referential self and standards and rules. Since texts used in our research referred to crimes committed by the in-group, primary emotions that we expected to observe during the reading were fear, anger, sadness, disgust, contempt and surprise, while self-conscious emotions that we expected to develop from these first reactions were shame and guilt. We expected that only participants reading detailed information enabling them to fully understand the violation of moral rules would develop group-based emotions of shame and guilt. Finally, we wanted to examine how self-conscious emotions expressed after a week could influence the intention to offer reparation, if any, to those formerly colonized.

Literal social denial of past in-group crimes

We chose to observe reactions to the breaking of a long-lasting lack of information about past in-group crimes because social denial of the in-group's past wrongdoings is quite a common phenomenon that occurs in the aftermath of intergroup violence, especially when victims are weak and socially isolated (Cohen, 2001). Although social denial on past in-group wrongdoings is commonplace, until now little research has been devoted to exploring the moment in which people have to finally face the in-group crimes previously denied in the current social discourse. To be explored in greater depth, however, this phenomenon has to be distinguished both from the initial silencing following a conflict settlement, and from reactions when facing well known sensitive historical issues.

On the one hand, immediately after the end of violence, silence is very often used, implicitly stressing the seriousness of past events through the deliberate decision not to talk about them. A transient period of silence after a preliminary conflict settlement, in fact, allows perpetrators, neutral bystanders and victims to live side by side and to continue their unavoidable social exchanges, while

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