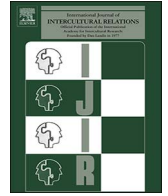


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Collective memories of colonialism and acculturation dynamics among Congolese immigrants living in Belgium

Ana Figueiredo^{a,b,*}, Géraldine Oldenhove^a, Laurent Licata^a

^a Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Belgium

^b Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile

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ABSTRACT

Collective memories of the historical past allow group members to make sense of their shared past but also to project themselves in the present and future. In this line, collective memories of colonialism may present consequences for present day intergroup relations and acculturation dynamics, given that they allow processes of meaning making and social positioning when different groups with a shared colonial past interact. Indeed, previous research has shown that collective memories are associated with processes of reconciliation, victimization, and group-based emotions, among others, but, to our knowledge, little research has paid attention to the connections between collective memories of colonialism and acculturation dynamics among groups with a past of colonization. The present study aimed to analyze collective memories of colonialism and acculturation experiences among Congolese immigrants living in Belgium. 43 semi-structured interviews with Congolese participants were content analyzed, using an analytical framework along the two variables of interest. We were able to map distinct aspects of the collective memories of colonialism that Congolese immigrants in Belgium have, as well as their experiences of acculturation in Belgium. Our results suggest that individuals remember their ingroup's past in accordance with their current social identifications and relationships within a given society. The results are discussed in light of their consequences for present day intergroup relations between host and immigrant communities in Belgium.

Introduction

In a recent interview, Calvin Soiresse Njall, the coordinator of “Mémoire coloniale et lutte contre les discriminations” (colonial memory and fight against discrimination), a Belgian association gathering sub-Saharan African immigrants, declared: “The problem is that Belgium never looked its colonial legacy in the face. Unfortunately, we believe that this legacy, if the Belgian State does not pay attention to it, is now exploding in its face, because African migrations are the result of this legacy” (Pointculture, 2015). Similar position takings have multiplied for the last decades among sub-Saharan diasporas in Europe as well as from immigrants from other formerly colonized countries. Some of their representatives established a connection between the colonial past and their social

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* Corresponding author at: Centre de Recherche en Psychologie Sociale et Interculturelle (CRéPSI), Av. F. Roosevelt 50, CP 122, 1050 Brussels, Belgium.

E-mail address: figueiredo.anacm@gmail.com (A. Figueiredo).

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integration in host countries as postcolonial migrants. Indeed, as underlined by the historians [Bosma, Lucassen, and Oostindie \(2012, p. 9\)](#), “the colonial past has left material and non-material legacies, ranging from metropolitan demographics and culture to ongoing ideological and possibly psychological impacts” (p. 9). However, so far, social and cross-cultural psychologists have paid little attention to the specificity of “postcolonial migrants” ([Momodou & Pascoët, 2014](#); [Rothberg, 2013](#)).

In this paper, we report an exploratory study aimed at uncovering connections between Congolese immigrants’ collective memories of Belgian colonialism and their acculturation orientations in the Belgian society. The main objectives of this study are threefold: 1) Examine the content of collective memories of Belgian colonialism among Congolese immigrants living in Belgium; 2) Examine these immigrants’ acculturative strategies; and 3) Uncover the potential connections between collective memories of the past and present day acculturation strategies in our immigrant sample.

Collective memories of the colonial past

Collective memories can be defined as “a shared set of representations of the past based on a common identity to a group” ([Licata & Klein, 2005; p. 243](#)), that allows group members to make sense of their past but also to project themselves in the present and future. In this line, collective memories of colonialism may be connected with present day intergroup relations and acculturation dynamics because they are part of the processes of meaning making and social positioning that take place when different groups with a shared colonial past interact.

Indeed, previous research has shown that collective memories – or social representations of the past – are associated with processes of reconciliation ([Hewstone et al., 2004](#); [Licata, Klein, & Gély, 2007](#); [Manzi & González, 2007](#); [Noor, Brown, Gonzalez, Manzi, & Lewis, 2008](#); [Tam et al., 2007, 2008](#); [Volpato & Licata, 2010](#); [Wohl & Branscombe, 2005](#)), victimization ([Wohl & Branscombe, 2004](#); [Zebel et al., 2009](#)), group-based emotions ([Barkan, 2000](#); [Brown et al., 2008](#); [Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998](#)), or even improvements of intellectual performance (e.g. [Bikmen, 2015](#)), among others. These collective memories can be seen as resources for defining and protecting social identities (e.g. [Jovchelovitch, 2012](#); [Licata et al., 2007](#); [Licata & Mercy, 2015](#); [Liu & Hilton, 2005](#); [Liu, Wilson, McClure, & Higgins, 1999](#); [Sani et al., 2007](#)) and for negotiating present day intergroup relations (e.g. [Smeekes, Verkuyten, & Poppe, 2011](#)).

So far, few psychological studies have investigated the content and structure of collective memories of colonialism among formerly colonized groups (for exceptions, see [Cabecinhas & Feijó, 2010](#); [Valentim, 2011](#)), and, to our knowledge, none has systematically addressed the connections between collective memories of colonialism and acculturation dynamics among groups with a past of colonization. A study by [David and Okazaki \(2006\)](#), which showed that distinct dimensions of the colonial mentality construct were negatively correlated with maintenance of the original culture, stands as an exception.

The Belgian colonization of the Congo started at the end of the 19th century. During the Belgian colonial period, the country lived in a highly segregated environment ([Turner, 2007](#)) and the extractive nature of the colonial system, as well as the atrocities committed against the indigenous populations have been well documented (e.g. [Hochschild, 1998](#)). By the end of the 1950’s, the pro-independence and self-determination movements in the country negotiated the independence with the Belgian authorities and, in June 1960, the country, currently named the Democratic Republic of the Congo, became independent under the leadership of Joseph Kasa-Vubu and Patrice Lumumba.

Due to the colonial relations between Belgium and the Congo, even before independence, there were small numbers of Congolese immigrants coming to Belgium, mainly for the purpose of studying and working. The Congolese immigration remained very limited until the 1990’s, when poverty, insecurity, and political instability led more Congolese people to leave their country. At present, there are approximately 40.000 immigrants of Congolese origins living in Belgium ([Schoonvaere, 2010](#)). Although this immigrant community has, on average, higher levels of education (such as university degrees) in comparison with other immigrant communities, they have a very high unemployment rate and they still face racism and discrimination in contemporary Belgian society ([Flahaux, Mangalu, & Rakotonarivo, 2014](#); [Schoonvaere, 2010](#)).

Acculturation of postcolonial migrants

[Bhatia and Ram \(2001\)](#) have argued that “any discussion about migrant identity must be situated and contextualized in historical terms” (p. 3). In line with this contention, it seems reasonable to expect that immigrant groups who share a past history with their host country will build on their representations of these historical relations when they acculturate to this host country (for a discussion on postcolonial migration see [Bosma et al., 2015](#)).

As [Demart \(2013\)](#) and [Bosma et al. \(2012\)](#) have claimed, Congolese immigrants in Belgium have received little attention in research. For example, most of the social psychological research that has focused on the representations and consequences of colonialism for present day intergroup relations in Belgium have been dedicated to understanding the Belgians’ perspective and experiences ([Caby, 2004](#); [Lastrego & Licata, 2010](#); [Licata & Klein, 2010](#)), with the exception of a study conducted by [Licata and Klein \(2005\)](#), in which they analyzed the representations of Belgian colonialism among former colonizers and former colonized participants. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the acculturation dynamics among Congolese immigrants living in Belgium, as most of the acculturation literature developed in Belgium has focused on other groups of immigrants, such as the Muslim communities (e.g. mainly Moroccan and Turkish, see [Beirens & Fontaine, 2011](#); [Güngör, Bornstein, & Phalet, 2012](#); [Kosic & Phalet, 2006](#); [Saroglou & Mathijssen, 2007](#); [Van Praag, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2016](#)), people originating from other European countries (e.g. [Gkoumasi, 2014](#); [Grigoryev, 2016](#); [Phalet & Swyngedouw, 2003](#)), and Latin American/Hispanic speaking immigrants (e.g. [Gkoumasi, 2014](#)).

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