



*Brief report*

## Does group identification facilitate or prevent collective guilt about past misdeeds? Resolving the paradox

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The influence of group identification on collective guilt and attitudes towards reparation was examined in the context of the Belgian colonization of Congo. People should experience collective emotions to the extent that being a member of the relevant group is part of their self-concept. Yet, the acknowledgement of ingroup responsibility for past misdeeds is particularly threatening for high identifiers and may lead to defensive reactions aimed at avoiding guilt. We therefore predicted, and found, a curvilinear effect of identification on collective guilt. Attitudes towards reparation of past wrongdoings were also assessed and yielded a linear trend: identification predicted less favourable attitudes towards reparation but this effect was marginally stronger as identification increased.

History is nothing more than a tableau of crimes and misfortunes

Voltaire (1767/2002, p. 37)

As Voltaire noted, groups, in the form of nations, states, and institutions, have committed actions that defy widespread moral standards. How do members of these groups react to the knowledge of such past misdeeds? For our contemporaries, it may seem convenient to reject the responsibility of these actions on distant ancestors and therefore to minimize their self-relevance. Yet, in the past decade, research has demonstrated that people may experience collective or group-based guilt (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; for a review, see Branscombe, 2004). Collective guilt can be defined as a self-focused emotion stemming from the sense of responsibility associated with the wrongdoings of one's group (Branscombe, Doosje, & McGarty, 2002). Thus, people may experience guilt, not because they have acted in morally condemnable ways but because members of their group have done so (Doosje *et al.*, 1998; Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006). This may seem at odds with research on interpersonal guilt (O'Connor, Berry, & Weiss, 1999; Tangney, 1995), which suggests

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that this emotion is an outcome of a personal sense of responsibility. So, how can this emotion emerge?

To respond to this question, one must assume that it may accrue from people's sense that their self and identity are shaped, not only by their idiosyncratic personal qualities, but by the group to which they belong and with which they share common beliefs and values, a process Self-Categorization Theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) calls 'depersonalization'. Through this process, other ingroup members, even if they are long deceased, may become part of the self. In such situations, the past glories and misfortunes of their group reflect on themselves and contribute to the value they attach to the part of the self-associated with their group membership (i.e., their social identity). This depersonalization is a function of contextual factors and of individual differences. Thus, people who identify strongly with their group are most likely to define themselves at the group level (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). If this is the case, one may expect the intensity of collective guilt in the face of past ingroup harm to be a positive function of group identification (see, e.g., Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000).

Yet, guilt is an aversive emotion and people may engage in elaborate psychological strategies to avoid it. The acknowledgement of past misdeeds is likely to be most threatening for those who strongly identify with their group (Branscombe, 2004; Sahdra & Ross, 2007). For example, Doosje *et al.* (1998: study 2) exposed students to depictions of Dutch colonial action in Indonesia, presenting this past either in positive (by highlighting achievements under Dutch colonial rule), negative (by mentioning exploitation and massacres), or ambiguous ways (by combining the two aspects). They found an interaction between this description and the level of identification, which was treated as a binary categorical variable. Thus, in the ambiguous condition, low identifiers experienced more collective guilt than high identifiers. In the other conditions, simple effects of identification were not significant. Hence, there are reasons to suspect that high identifiers should experience less guilt than others.

This confronts us with two apparently contradictory hypotheses: on the one hand, group identification should facilitate the experience of collective guilt. On the other hand, high identifiers may experience less group-based guilt than low or mid-identifiers precisely because the acknowledgement of past wrongdoings, and the guilt it evokes, would be more threatening to their social identity (Doosje *et al.*, 1998). Indeed, this makes them more likely to develop defensive strategies to part with this emotion, such as denial or legitimization of the harm done to the outgroup (see also, Miron, Branscombe, & Biernat, 2010). These antagonistic effects of identification on collective guilt may explain why many empirical studies have failed to clearly establish an effect of identification on collective guilt (Gordijn, Yzerbyt, Wigbolduys, & Dumont, 2006; Harth, Kessler, & Leach, 2008; Johns, Schmader, & Lickel, 2005; see also Branscombe, 2004; Iyer & Leach, 2008 and for discussions).

To resolve this paradox, it is possible to assume that the relationship between group identification and collective guilt may not be linear. Thus, at low to moderate levels, group identification may predict collective guilt. However, when it reaches a certain point, acknowledging ingroup responsibility may be too aversive and people can therefore resort to defensive strategies. High identifiers may, for example, minimize the severity of the harm done to such an extent that guilt is not experienced (Branscombe, 2004). Thus, we expect the relation between group identification and collective guilt to be curvilinear with a maximum for middle identifiers (Hypothesis 1). Identifying such a relationship requires a sample with a sufficiently large variation in identification levels.

A major consequence of collective guilt is that it prompts group members to repair the harm done (Branscombe, Slugoski, & Kappen, 2004; Schmitt, Miller, Branscombe, & Brehm, 2008). When collective misdeeds are the source of guilt, attempts at reparation generally take the form of public apologies (Blatz, Schumann, & Ross, 2009; Lastrego & Licata, 2010) or more rarely of financial compensations (Schmitt, Branscombe, & Brehm, 2004). And indeed, collective guilt has been found to predict the willingness to endorse reparative action (Branscombe *et al.*, 2004; Doosje *et al.*, 1998; Iyer, Leach, & Pedersen, 2004). Thus, a straightforward hypothesis would be that attitudes towards reparation should follow the same path as guilt. However, when considering attitudes towards reparation, it is also crucial to assess their costs. These can be material – for example, if reparation affects the financial standing of the ingroup. They can also be symbolic: as Schmitt *et al.* (2004) note, making reparations implicitly acknowledges that the ingroup has illegitimately benefited from its actions towards the outgroup, which may hurt social identity. When effective reparation is too costly, or appears impossible, people may no longer be motivated to repair the harm done. Thus, high identifiers who experience little guilt and view reparations as very costly to their social identity should be least favourable to reparations. Conversely, when the costs of reparation are minimal compared to the benefits it may accrue, such as reconciliation and more harmonious intergroup relations, people may support it *even if they experience minimal guilt*. For low identifiers, supporting reparation is a relatively cheap act as the symbolic consequences of this act (e.g., publicly endorsing ingroup responsibility for the harm done) will bear little on social identity compared to their positive consequences (e.g., reconciliation). They may therefore support reparation even if they experience little collective guilt. Thus, we expect support for reparation to be higher at low and moderate levels than at high levels of identification (Hypothesis 2).

### **Historical context**

These hypotheses were tested in the context of a study conducted with Belgian citizens. As the main aspect of Belgian history likely to generate collective guilt, the colonization of Congo was chosen as the historical context. Congo came under colonial rule as the ‘private’ property of King Leopold II. After having financed an ‘exploration’ of the country by H.M. Stanley, and having convinced major powers to let him rule the Congolese territory, he exploited the colony ruthlessly between 1885 and 1908. He relied on a massive system of forced labour, most noticeably to harvest rubber, for which the demand steadily increased after the invention of the automobile. To conquer these vast territories, he had to rely on armed forces, the ‘Force Publique’, which has been accused of killings and atrocities. Leopold II claimed that his main goal in sending armed troops to the Congo was to fight Arab slave traders who penetrated Congo through its Eastern part. In the early 20th century, a public outcry emerged in response to his treatment of the Congolese (Morel, 1906). This, and financial reasons, prompted him to cede the colony to Belgium. Opinions vary as to whether colonial rule became more ‘humane’ under Belgian rule (cf. Stengers, 1989). But the colony contributed to vastly enriching Belgium especially through mining of mineral resources. Nevertheless, the Belgians imposed primary education everywhere in the Congo and also built a relatively efficient sanitary system. Belgian colonial rule ended abruptly in 1960 as, out of fear that recent nationalistic pressure might degenerate in a Civil war, Belgium granted independence to its colony. This past was more recently put to the fore with the publication of a best seller by the American journalist Hochschild (1998) who accused the King of having

perpetrated a 'Holocaust' in Congo. After the translation of this book, these allegations have created some turmoil in Belgium, shortly before the present study was conducted.

## Method

### *Participants, design, and procedure*

Undergraduate psychology students at a Belgian University were asked to fill in a questionnaire about Belgian colonial action in the Congo and to administer the same questionnaire to one of their parents and one of their grandparents. They returned the three questionnaires 2 weeks later for course credit. Only Belgian nationals were selected ( $M_{age} = 46.20$ ;  $SD = 22.68$ ;  $Min = 18$ ;  $Max = 92$ ;  $N = 496^1$ ). As the intraclass correlations (within families) for the focal dependent variables were not different from zero ( $\alpha = .05$ ), we treated the observations as independent.

### *Measures*

As the questionnaire addressed many aspects of participants' appraisal of the colonization of Congo, only the measures of direct relevance to the present paper are described below (see Licata & Klein, 2010 for other results). Note that, unless otherwise mentioned, all items were measured on 9-point scales (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*).

Belgian identification was assessed through five items: 'I feel Belgian', 'I identify with Belgium', 'being Belgian is an important aspect of how I define myself', 'I am happy to be Belgian', 'I love Belgium' ( $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 5.80$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ).

We measured collective guilt via four items: 'As a Belgian, I feel guilty about what happened in the Congo', 'As a Belgian, I regret when I think about the actions that the Belgian administration and Belgian colonials have done to the Congolese during colonization', 'As a Belgian, when I think about Belgian action in the Congo, I feel remorse', and 'I feel guilt when I think about Belgian colonial action in the Congo' ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

Participants were asked to express their attitude towards symbolic and material reparation - 'I believe that the Belgian government should publicly apologize for its actions during colonization' and 'I believe that the Belgian government should offer a financial compensation to the Congolese for its actions during colonization'. These items were aggregated ( $r = .62$ ).

Besides these measures, the questionnaire included items assessing the representation of the Belgian colonization of Congo. Items that had been developed based on earlier research (Licata & Klein, 2005; Stanciu, 2003) described different aspects of colonization. Participants had to rate to what extent they thought about each of them when answering this questionnaire. A principal components analysis with Varimax rotation showed that two factors jointly accounted for 62.15% of the overall variance. The first factor (explaining 35.23% of the variance) was labelled 'Severity of harm done'. It included the following items: forced labour, exploitation of the Congolese, racial segregation, mutilations, massacres, and use of natural resources for profit. Ratings were averaged to form a single scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ). The second factor was labelled 'Legitimization' (explaining 26.76% of the variance), with the following items: building the educational system, hospitals, roads and economic infrastructures, and the work of churches and

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<sup>1</sup> Gender was not assessed due to an error in the elaboration of the questionnaire.

**Table 1.** Correlations between the main variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Severity of harm	1.00				
2. Legitimization	.024	1.00			
3. Identification	-.14*	.22*	1.00		
4. Collective guilt	.42*	-.08	-.05	1.00	
5. Reparation	.44*	-.32*	-.27*	.47*	1.00

Note. \* $p < .01$ .

missionaries. These items, with the exception of the last one (which contributed negatively to the overall reliability of the scale) were averaged ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Note that these items were assessed at the end of the questionnaire in order to avoid inducing a representation of colonization that may have interfered with participants' existing views.

## Results

### Correlations

The present analyses focus on three key dependent variables: collective guilt, attitudes towards reparation, and one independent variable, national identification. Earlier studies (Branscombe, 2004; Dressler-Hawke & Liu, 2006; Licata & Klein, 2010) have identified another crucial factor likely to impact on these variables: the representation and interpretation of past actions, which was operationalized here as the 'Severity of harm done' (Harm) and 'Legitimization' scores. We first computed the Pearson correlations between all of these variables (see Table 1). It is important to note that Identification is negatively associated with Harm and positively with Legitimization, indicating a rosier view of past ingroup actions as Identification increases, a classic finding (Branscombe, 2004; Miron *et al.*, 2010). Second, correlations show no linear effect of identification on collective guilt but a negative effect of identification on support for reparation, both of which are in line with this more positive view of colonization. Of particular interest, we find a positive correlation between attitudes towards reparation and collective guilt.

### Analysis strategy

Next, we computed hierarchical linear regressions to assess the effect of identification on the key dependent variables, over and above the effects of Age, Harm, and Legitimization. This strategy also allows us to control for the differences in the representation of the past as a function of Age and Identification (Licata & Klein, 2010).

### Collective guilt

Table 2 reports the outcome of this analysis after a multivariate outlier (*Cook's D* = .07) was excluded based on the criteria recommended by McClelland (2000). The linear effect of identification on collective guilt was non-significant, whereas the quadratic effect was small but reliable, indicating that collective guilt was highest for middle identifiers and lower for low and high identifiers (see Table 2 and Figure 1). This is

**Table 2.** Multiple regression predicting collective guilt and attitudes towards reparation as a function of identification

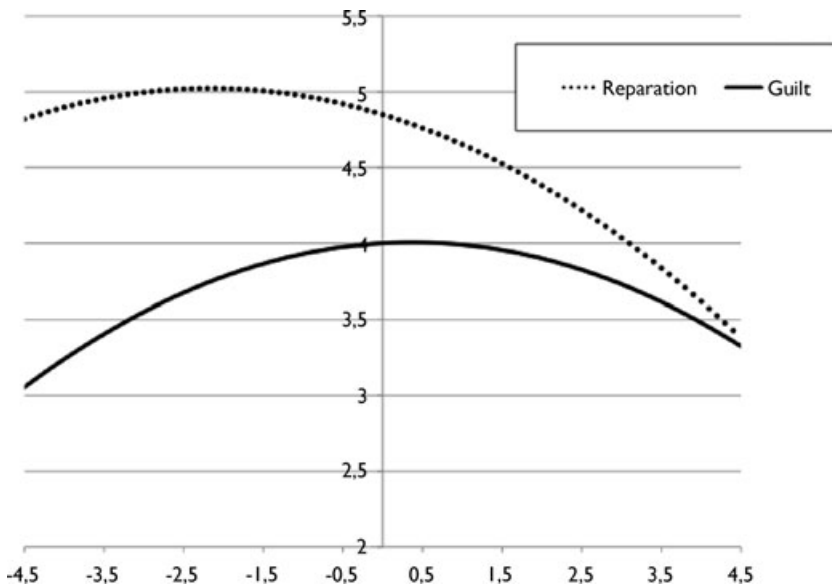
	Collective guilt			Reparation attitudes		
	B	SE (B)	$\beta$	B	SE (B)	$\beta$
Intercept	4.00**	.08		4.84**	.01*	
Age	-.00	.004	-.03	-.01*	.31**	.005
Legitimization	-.06	.04	-.07	-.31**	.05	-.27**
Severity of harm done	.41**	.04	.43**	-.50**	.05	.42**
Identification (linear)	.03	.04	.03	-.16**	.05	-.13**
Identification (quadratic)	-.04*	.02	-.09*	-.03 <sup>†</sup>	.02	-.07 <sup>†</sup>
		$R^2 = .20$			$R^2 = .35$	

Notes. <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

consistent with Hypothesis 1. Note also that, unsurprisingly, the perceived severity of Harm done influenced collective guilt positively, but that Legitimization did not influence it negatively.

**Attitudes towards reparation**

As can be seen from Table 2 and Figure 1, Identification exerted a negative linear effect on attitudes towards reparation: participants were less willing to repair to the extent that they identified more. The quadratic trend approached conventional significance, which suggests that the linear effect was stronger as identification increased.



**Figure 1.** Collective guilt and attitudes towards reparation as a function of identification with Belgium. Note. The lines represent predicted values based on multiple linear regressions.

## Discussion

The findings of the present study can be summarized as follows: collective guilt about colonialism was affected non-linearly by group identification with higher guilt for mid-identifiers compared to low and high identifiers. By contrast, we observed only a linear trend for attitudes towards reparation: as identification increased, attitudes became more negative, a finding that is consistent with earlier research (e.g., Doosje *et al.*, 1998). These findings show that, although attitudes towards reparation and collective guilt are related, the implications of collective guilt and reparation for social identity may be quite different. With respect to collective guilt, the curvilinear relationship indicates the presence of two opposing processes: to the extent that the experience of collective guilt is a function of a salient social identity, social identification facilitates the experience of this emotion but, given that collective guilt threatens this social identity, high identifiers are also likely to display defensive reactions.

With respect to reparation, we expected a quadratic effect of identification (Hypothesis 2) with high identifiers rejecting reparation while low and mid-identifiers supported it for different reasons: because it was not costly for the former's social identity and because the latter experienced guilt. This quadratic effect was only marginal whereas the linear negative effect of identification, traditionally found in the literature (e.g., Doosje *et al.*, 1998) was strong. Thus, as identification increases, so does the threat posed by the public acknowledgement of ingroup responsibility for past wrongdoings, which may explain lesser support for such initiatives.

These effects were observed in a sample with a wide range of identification levels, which allowed us to perform a more fine-grained analysis than in most similar studies and detect small quadratic trends, which could have been mistaken for linear trends, or for the total absence of a trend, in samples with lower ranges of identification levels. For example, in the Netherlands, national identification is on average much higher than in Belgium (Citrin & Sides, 2004), which may explain why only the upper part of the trend (with identification diminishing collective guilt) was observed by Doosje *et al.* (1998).

One could argue of course that, in the present study, high identifiers experienced lower collective guilt because they have been socialized to a rosier view of colonization (which is true, see Licata & Klein, 2010). However, it is important to note that the effects of identification on collective guilt were observed over and above the representations of colonial action, that are captured by the 'Harm' and 'Legitimization' scales. This suggests that they are not only driven by differences in socialization or beliefs regarding the Belgian colonial past. Moreover, compared to the effect of the severity of harm (that strongly predicts collective guilt), the effect of identification on guilt remains relatively limited in size. This may partially account for the absence of such effects in earlier research with smaller samples, which failed to control for representations of past ingroup actions. This modest size might also be due to the lack of salience of colonial history for present-day Belgians (cf. Stanciu, 2003).

Contrary to what earlier research (e.g., Miron *et al.*, 2010; Miron *et al.*, 2006) suggests, legitimization did not significantly attenuate collective guilt. An explanation for this may be that the legitimization items referred to elements justifying the colonial system in general (i.e., as providing education, infrastructures, etc.) rather than the specific massacres and atrocities that prompt collective guilt (Licata & Klein, 2010). This may also explain why legitimization still predicts reparation negatively: independently of their level of guilt in relation to such atrocities, people who believe that colonial action has benefited the Congolese may find that immoral actions have already been compensated by the benefits brought about by colonization.

The main limitation of the present study resides in the use of a correlational design, which does not allow to unambiguously establish the causal direction of some of the effects. For example, an observer could assume that one of the responses to the negative social identity associated with collective guilt is to psychologically disengage from the perpetrating group. This would be consistent with research on stigma (e.g., Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Spears, 2001) and with the observation that reminders of ingroup-perpetrated harm result in lower identification (Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005). In the present case, we believe however that such a causal direction is unlikely: first, social identification was measured before participants were asked to report their emotions, attitudes, and representations associated with Belgian action in the Congo; second, as already noted, Belgian colonial history played a relatively small role in Belgians' socialization (Stanciu, 2003). Thus, Belgian identity is unlikely to be chronically affected by this history (compared to, e.g., German national identity: Dresler-Hawke & Liu, 2006; Rensmann, 2004). Yet, to more unambiguously establish the direction of these effects, future research should rely on experimental manipulations (e.g., Doosje *et al.*, 1998) or longitudinal designs.

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