

# **“Should a country’s leaders apologize for its past misdeeds?” An analysis of the effects of both public apologies from a Belgian official and perception of Congolese victims’ continued suffering on Belgians’ representations of colonial action, support for reparation, and attitudes towards the Congolese**

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## *Abstract*

*This study sought to identify the conditions facilitating the recognition of a social group’s past misdeeds among its members. Such recognition entails a threat to group members’ social identity, potentially triggering defensive strategies, such as denying these misdeeds, not experiencing collective guilt and shame, opposing reparative actions, and derogating the victim group’s members. As collective rituals, public apologies performed by an official representative should allow group members to acknowledge the harm done while maintaining a positive social identity, therefore alleviating the need for such defensive strategies. We carried out an experimental study based on a 2 (Apologies vs. No apologies) × 2 (Continued suffering vs. No continued suffering) + 1 (Control) design, with Belgian participants (N = 164). In all conditions, participants were reminded of the atrocities committed during the first years of the Belgian colonization of Congo. This description was followed by a short statement about the suffering that Congolese people still endured (Continued suffering condition) or none (No continued suffering), then by a transcript of public apologies pronounced by Belgium’s Foreign Affairs Minister in the Apologies condition, or none (No apologies). Results revealed that Belgian participants’ attitudes and behavioural intentions towards the Congolese were the most positive when both apologies and the victims’ continued suffering were reunited. A mediation analysis further demonstrated that differences in levels of racism and in support for reparation were mediated by representations of the ingroup’s past.*

*Keywords:* Public apologies, social representations, social identity, Belgium, Congo.

# **¿Debe un país pedir perdón por sus errores pasados? Un análisis de los efectos conjuntos de las disculpas públicas de un representante político belga y de la percepción del sufrimiento continuo de las víctimas congoleñas en las representaciones de los belgas sobre el pasado colonial, apoyo a reparaciones y actitudes ante los congoleños**

## *Resumen*

*Se analizarán las condiciones que facilitan que un grupo reconozca los “delitos” llevados a cabo por este mismo grupo en el pasado. Este reconocimiento puede suponer una amenaza para la identidad social de los miembros que puede provocar estrategias defensivas. La petición pública de perdón por parte de un representante oficial del endogrupo podría permitir a los miembros del grupo asumir el daño causado manteniendo a su vez una identidad social positiva. Se llevó a cabo un estudio experimental con un diseño 2 (perdón/no perdón) × 2 (sufrimiento continuado/no sufrimiento) + 1 (control) con participantes belgas (n = 164). En todas las condiciones se recordó a los participantes las atrocidades cometidas durante los primeros años de la colonización belga del Congo. Los resultados muestran que las actitudes e intenciones conductuales de los participantes hacia las personas del Congo eran más positivas en la condición en la que se ofrecía perdón y el sufrimiento continuaba presente. Un análisis mediacional mostró que las diferencias en los niveles de racismo y apoyo a la reparación se encontraban mediadas por las representaciones del pasado del endogrupo.*

*Palabras clave:* Perdón público, representaciones sociales, identidad social, Bélgica, Congo.

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How fundamental is it to look back at our past and question it? Historians would certainly argue that the way in which we look back at our actions influences our present behaviour. But what do psychologists have to say about it? Recently Páez et al. (2008) have shown that winning a war has an impact on how people legitimate violence, even after various generations. In contrast, this phenomenon cannot be found among the defeated. This idea strengthens Licata and Klein's (2005) suggestion that a shared representation of the past among ingroup members brings them closer to each other. However, is it possible to modify this representation without diminishing their social bonding? As suggested by Páez et al. (2008), it seems that winners have to make a greater effort than the defeated in order to maintain a peaceful vision of relationships. On the basis of Durkheim's conception of rituals, we suggested a solution to this problem by proposing the idea that public excuses could bring awareness of the group's negative past, while avoiding threatening people's social identity. In fact, by offering the group's excuses, the group's representative (be it the Prime Minister, the President, or the Minister of foreign affairs) indicates to the nation what attitude has to be adopted with regards to the victims, which should allow them to experience collective guilt and consider reparative behaviour, whilst it also strengthens the group's identity.

In this article, we focus on the effects of public excuses on the collective emotions of the 'guilty' group's members, intergroup attitudes, and degree of support for reparative actions. We present a study carried out in Belgium. Belgium's past has recently been criticized for the violence of its colonial action in the Congo, during the reign of King Leopold II (Hochschild, 1998). But, since Congo's independence in 1960, no public excuse was ever uttered by Belgian official representatives to the Congolese people. On the contrary, negative depictions of the country's colonial enterprise generally trigger acerbic criticism from some parts of Belgium's public opinion. And this negative side of Belgium's history remains largely unknown.

The Congo Free State was established in 1885 at Berlin's international conference. From 1885 to 1908, Congo belonged to the Belgian King Leopold II. During that period Congolese people suffered of various ill-treatments, including the famous amputation of the hand. Severing hands has been described as a recurrent form of punishment used to force the population to meet the rubber quotas requested (Haim, 1995). These mistreatments were denounced through an international humanitarian campaign at the beginning of the twentieth century (Morel, 1906); as a result, Leopold II legated the colony to the Belgian government. Congo then became a proper Belgian colony, until 1960 when it conquered its independence.

However, historians are still currently debating over the exact extent of the damage done to the Congolese people during the different phases of Belgian colonization (versus its benefits), the intentionality behind these sufferings, or the degree to which colonization is responsible for the country's present situation (Ndaywel è Nziem, 2005; Vellut, 2005). It is not our intention to take part in this debate. But, as a historical period strongly associated with Belgian identity, colonization appears as a good example of a problematic past that can bear on the present. In addition, the Democratic Republic of Congo currently experiences a difficult situation, with one of the highest rates of poverty in the world (Mutamba Lukusa, 1999) and recurring civil wars, which seems to highlight the colonizers' responsibility for that present suffering. Finally, a growing number of Congolese people now live in Belgium, so that Belgian people have concrete opportunities to get into contact with Congolese people.

### **The ingroup's past and its link to social identity**

According to Baumeister & Hastings (1997), ingroup members try to maintain a positive image of their group by avoiding facts that could represent the ingroup as amoral and sometimes even by distorting the reality. This allows them to consider their

group as fair and to free themselves from questioning their group's morality and from experiencing negative emotions. Furthermore, Roccas, Klar & Liviatan (2004, p. 131) argued that "confronting information that indicates one's ingroup has committed acts that are incompatible with one's moral standards is an unpleasant psychological experience for most if not all group members". Moreover, Reicher & Haslam (2006) showed that the loss of positive social identity can have important consequences on self-esteem. Indeed, recognizing the ingroup's faults generates negative emotions such as collective guilt (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004). According to Branscombe, Doosje & McGarty (2002), collective guilt represents the distress experienced by group members when they accept the fact that their ingroup is responsible for physical or moral infractions towards an outgroup. Two conditions are necessary in order to feel guilty for actions committed by the ingroup: (1) to consider oneself as belonging to the ingroup and (2) to consider the ingroup as guilty (Branscombe et al., 2002). Furthermore, the same authors discovered two other conditions that can increase collective guilt, once the two first conditions are satisfied: (1) the ingroup must recognize the fact that the victims are still in a lower position and (2) a critical questioning must arouse in the ingroup, allowing the questioning of the group's morality.

According to Branscombe & Doosje (2004), recognition of the ingroup's faults seems to play an important role in the process of reconciliation; however, this first step faces an important obstacle: the necessity to maintain a positive image of the ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Indeed, Brown, Gonzalez, Zagefka, Manzi & Cehajic (2008) and Roccas et al. (2004) have shown that people who highly identify with their group have a greater resistance to accept facts implying an acknowledgment of the misdeeds.

Brown (1998) suggests that leaders are the only ones who can freely express a critique over their own group. Critiques are generally not well accepted by ingroup members, who tend to consider the critics as deviants. In contrast, when the same negative point of view is expressed by a leader, it is regarded as denoting a wish to improve the group, therefore eliciting more positive reactions. Hence, Páez (2010) suggests that only leaders, through official excuses, could induce a change of representation of the past among members of the faulty group. This idea is based upon Durkheim's (1912) vision of rituals as reinforcing group members' social bonding. Consequently, Páez (2010) suggested that public excuses are a form of ritual which allows, on the one hand, recognizing the misdeeds of the past and, on the other hand, to reinforce the ingroup's social identity. During the leader's speech, members could perceive a recognition of the past faults and collective guilt as norms worth adopting. Accordingly, Rimé (2005) noticed that rituals allow the sharing of emotions, even if they are negative, therefore strengthening social bonding among members. In the case of an apology, the expression of collective guilt expressed by the leader could allow ingroup members to feel this emotion as well, which will reinforce their bonding. Moreover, these public apologies should also allow people to modify the social representation of the past events at stake, towards a greater recognition of its negative sides. Consequently, the apologies pronounced by the leader should lead group members to express more critical representations of the group's past, while reinforcing their social bonding among each other.

### **Public excuses as a tool for avoiding cognitive dissonance**

As explained previously, individuals tend to maintain a positive image of their group, because doubting it would lower their self-esteem (Reicher & Haslam, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Having to face facts that might weaken the group's image is so threatening that particular cognitive processes might take place in order to avoid such an unpleasant situation. Thus, we suggest that the will to maintain a desirable perception of the group, combined to the recalling of past misdeeds of the ingroup,

constitutes a situation of cognitive dissonance. As Festinger (1957) described, cognitive dissonance is a state of mind in which two cognitions are contradictory. To avoid it, individuals generally adjust one of the cognitions, in order to overcome the contradiction. People desiring to maintain a positive image of themselves and their group might therefore adapt their representations of the past, either by denying the facts themselves, by considering the behaviours at stake as moral, or by diminishing the consequences of their group's misdeeds (Augustinos & LeCouteur, 2004).

In our view, the public expression of apologies by a legitimate representative of the group could alleviate this cognitive dissonance: by recognizing the reality and immorality of the group's past behaviour, and by expressing his/her feelings, the leader gives a formal permission to the members of the group to think and feel likewise. Hence, public excuses allow subordinates to recognize the facts while maintaining a positive image of the ingroup. Conversely, in the absence of public excuses, reminding group members of their group's past transgression of moral norms constitutes a situation of cognitive dissonance, as this reminiscence would be in conflict with the need for a positive social identity.

According to Lickel, Schmader & Barquissau (2004), the first step towards a feeling of collective guilt is to recognize the ingroup's misdeeds. We argue that this first step cannot be achieved without the leader's support since individuals will seek to avoid cognitive dissonance. Public excuses can therefore be a powerful means to recall the misdeeds committed in the name of the group without threatening its members' social identity. Moreover, based upon Durkheim's (1912) conception of rituals, we suggest that public excuses can reinforce social identity. In the absence of public excuses pronounced by a legitimate representative of the group, people should adopt strategies to lower this cognitive dissonance. One such strategy, as stated above, is to simply deny the veracity of these facts, which should lead to the expression of positive representations of the group's past (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997). Hence, we suggest that the first important step in reconciliation processes is not to experience collective guilt but to change the representations of the past.

### **Public apologies, victims' suffering and compensation**

According to Branscombe, Slugoski & Kappen (2004), recognition of the ingroup's misdeeds denotes a desire to repair these, since this opportunity allows for re-establishing a sense of morality among its members. Indeed, Lickel et al. (2004) observed that this recognition predicted the motivation to repair. This can be explained by the fact that those who feel guilty wish to obtain the victims' forgiveness (Mallett & Swim, 2004). However, people are generally very reluctant to grant compensations, since they are generally very expensive. Therefore, only specific perceptions of the situation elicit support for reparative actions. Schmitt, Branscombe & Brehm (2004) noticed an interesting phenomenon: the greater the victims' suffering, the greater the motivation to repair. Consequently, the victims' suffering must be perceived as very important in order to accept to compensate them (Starzyk & Ross, 2008). Furthermore, this suffering must be continued: members of the victim group must still experience it, being in a lower position (Branscombe et al., 2002; Starzyk & Ross, 2008). We therefore suggest that, in order to be motivated to offer compensations, individuals must: (1) perceive that the suffering is both important and current, and (2) accept to consider the ingroup as responsible for the other group's suffering. Again, public apologies can contribute to the recognition of the continued suffering the group is responsible for, and to envision solutions to end it. As a consequence, public apologies should facilitate the ingroup members' support for reparation, particularly when the out-group's suffering is depicted as continued.

## Overview and hypotheses

Public excuses should allow subordinates to face distressful facts concerning their ingroup. In fact, by publicly expressing collective guilt, the leader shows that it is necessary for group members to recognize the harm done to the outgroup members in the past, to experience the corresponding emotions, and to engage in the corresponding reparative behaviour. In doing so, the leader also reinforces the social bonding between members, and bolsters their common identity. Consequently, we suggest the following hypotheses:

1. To the extent that public apologies offer a solution for alleviating the experienced cognitive dissonance, participants exposed to Public Apologies should recognize the ingroup's past faults (hence a negative perception of the Belgian colonization) more than participants who are not.
2. They should also express a more favourable perception of the Congolese people (hence a lower score on the racist scale compared to the other conditions), and express a stronger motivation to undertake a relationship with the Congolese community than participants who are not.
3. Moreover, they should also be significantly more motivated to support a reparations' offer towards Congolese people.
4. And they should experience an important level of collective guilt, associated with the recognition of the faults and their belonging to the guilty group.
5. A behavioural change should also be observed across our four conditions. Participants assigned to a Suffering condition should be significantly more motivated to support an offer of reparations towards Congolese people.
6. Moreover, we suggest that participants exposed to the Combined condition should report higher scores of recognition of the group's misdeeds, of positive perception of Congolese people, of desire to undertake a relationship with the Congolese, a higher motivation to finance compensations, and a stronger feeling of collective guilt.
7. Finally, we expect that Public Apologies and perception of Continued Suffering influence intergroup attitudes and support for reparation to the extent that they have an impact on people's representations of the colonial past. We therefore expect that representations of the past will mediate the effects of Public Apologies and perception of Continued Suffering on these variables.

## Method

### *Participants*

Ninety psychology undergraduate students received extra course credit for participation in what we presented as a study on the memory of the Belgian Congo. However, only 47 of the participants were Belgians, therefore we recruited the rest of the sample by allowing any volunteer to participate. In the end, our sample was composed of 164 Belgian participants. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four online questionnaires. The average age was 33 ( $SD = 18.22$ ; min. = 17, max. = 78). The majority of the participants were women ( $N = 111$ ); 87 were students.

### *Procedure*

Participants had to request the questionnaire. In return, they received an e-mail with a link towards one of four versions of the online questionnaire. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. They had to write down their consent, which allowed them to get hold of the questionnaire. After the completion of the questionnaire, participants received a written debriefing explaining the aim of the study.

*Materials and Design*

Participants were first asked to fill in a national identification scale. Then they were asked to read a short introductory text that emphasized the misdeeds committed by Belgians against the Congolese during the colonial period. It explained that colonization allowed Belgium to develop a very lucrative traffic by using: the control of the indigenous populations; their deportation; forced labour implying using women and children as hostages to oblige men to work at the gathering of latex; the destruction of whole villages; and tortures and mutilations against recalcitrant Congolese. It also emphasised the idea that the only public indignations came from two Anglo-Saxons, while Belgians remained very silent on the issue. Finally, it underlined that, since decolonization in 1960, Belgium has never faced its horrific past<sup>1</sup>.

Participants in all conditions had to read this text. The experimental manipulation took place after this recalling of past misdeeds. A 2 (Continued Suffering vs. No Continued Suffering) x 2 (Public Apologies vs. No Public Apologies) design was used. The Continued suffering conditions specified, at the end of the introductory text, that the Congolese people continued to suffer from Belgium's colonial actions in the present; whereas it was stated that they did not suffer anymore from this action in the No Continued Suffering conditions. In the Public Apologies conditions a short text was presented as a transcript of a discourse pronounced by Belgium's Foreign Affairs Minister, through which he publicly apologized for the harm done to the Congolese people during colonization.

*"Today the report of the CEGES (Centre d'Études et de Documentation Guerre et Société contemporaine) was published. This report shows the lengths of indifference of Belgium and its Government towards the suffering of the Congolese people. Now it is time to put an end to this indifference by presenting our apologies for the atrocities we forced upon the Congolese people. It is also time to recognize our atrocities such as: slavery, deportations, wars, massacres, captures, imprisonment and torture. These acts represent a shameful page of our history, which we want to turn at last. Today, we want to publicly recognise the responsibility of the authorities of that time for the suffering of the Congolese people and to say: in the name of tolerance we will not tolerate intolerance ever again".*

This text was not presented in the No Public apologies conditions. Table I summarises the manipulations performed in each condition.

TABLE I  
*Description of experimental conditions*

Condition	Introductory text	1: Excuses	2: Suffering
1 : Control	Present	Absent	Absent
2 : Suffering	Present	Absent	Present
3 : Public Apologies	Present	Present	Absent
4 : Combined	Present	Present	Present

The questionnaires were identical apart for the manipulation of the independent variables. Unless otherwise indicated, all self-report measures were answered on 7-point Likert scales, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

*Identification with the group* (Roccas et al., 2004) measured the participants' identification with the Belgian nation (6 items,  $\alpha = .79$ ). A sample item of the identification scale is, "I feel close to other Belgians".

Following the identification scale participants had to read the introductory text and (according to the condition) the Public Apologies text and/or the description of the Continued Suffering. These were then followed by a wide range of *emotion* terms (pride, guilt, astonishment, sadness, shame, anger, happiness and satisfaction) in order to understand what kind of emotion could be provoked by the experimental manipulations.

*Collective Guilt* (Brown et al., 2008) was measured with 9 items ( $\alpha = .84$ ). This scale was used in order to measure the guilt experienced by the participants after reading the introductory text. A sample item is, "I sometimes feel guilty for what the Belgians have done to the Congolese during the colonization".

Perception of Congolese was measured with the *Symbolic Racism 2000 Scale* (Henry & Sears, 2002). This scale was composed of 5 items ( $\alpha = .71$ ). A sample item of this scale is, "Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Congolese should do the same".

*Support for reparation* (Brown et al., 2008) measured the intention to support and/or finance compensations for the past misdeeds (8 items,  $\alpha = .86$ ) and a sample item of this scale is, "Finance an association in Congo whose aim would be to help develop the wellbeing of the Congolese population".

*Desire to establish relationships with the Congolese community living in Belgium* was measured with 5 items ( $\alpha = .62$ ) measuring the likelihood to develop relationships with the Congolese community, and a sample item of the scale is, "I wouldn't disapprove if one of my children wanted to marry a Congolese".

*Representations of colonization* was measured with 6 items ( $\alpha = .86$ ), including 3 positive and 3 negative considerations on the Belgian colonization of Congo. A sample item is, "During the colonization, Belgians have often made the Congolese suffer".

## Results

According to our overall hypotheses, we expected to observe more positive attitudes towards Congolese people and a more negative perception of colonization in the Public Apologies conditions, while the Continued Suffering conditions should elicit a stronger motivation to repair the ingroup's faults. Moreover, our last hypothesis suggested that the condition where we combined Public Apologies and Continued Suffering should report higher scores compared to the other conditions. Hence, if this was verified, we should obtain a linear progression from the Control to the Combined condition, with the other two conditions occupying intermediate positions. The first contrast (see Table II) should then be significant. Secondly, we introduced a quadratic contrast which translates our least expected results (a similarity among the control condition and the condition where we combined our two manipulations). Finally, the cubic contrast tests the idea that the Continued Suffering condition might induce similar effects as the Combined condition (see Table II for contrasts).

TABLE II  
Coefficients for each contrast

	Conditions			
	Control	Suffering	Public Apologies	Combined
Linear	-3	-1	1	3
Quadratic	1	-1	-1	1
Cubic	-1	3	-3	1

In our first hypothesis, we suggested that Public Apologies should induce recognition of the ingroup's misdeeds and a lower score on the racism scale. As predicted, we observed significant differences among the conditions with regards to the perception of Belgian colonization:  $F_{(3, 160)} = 4.193, p < .05$ . The analyses revealed a significant linear contrast:  $F_{(1, 160)} = 8.213, p < .05$ , and a marginally significant cubic contrast:  $F_{(1, 160)} = 3.461, p < .10$ . The first contrast indicates that Belgian colonization is perceived as most negative in the Combined condition, whereas it is least negatively

perceived in the Control condition. However, the cubic contrast indicates that the linear relationship among the conditions is not perfect, as even though the highest score is observed in the Combined condition it is followed by the Continued Suffering condition rather than the Public Apologies condition. Means and standard deviations for each dependent variable are presented in table III.

TABLE III  
Descriptive statistics for each dependent variable measured

	Condition			
	Control	Suffering	Public Apologies	Combined
<i>Dependent variables</i>	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Emotion (astonishment)	4.11 (2.25)	3.87 (1.92)	4.23 (2.01)	2.93 (1.96)
Racism	4.45 (1.30)	3.99 (1.11)	4.41 (0.96)	3.55 (1.01)
Support for reparations	4.92 (1.48)	5.21 (1.32)	5.04 (.93)	5.63 (1.07)
Desire to establish relationship	5.39 (1.49)	6.13 (1.09)	5.53 (1.59)	6.50 (0.81)
Negative representation of colonization	4.32 (1.51)	4.90 (1.07)	4.65 (0.92)	5.14 (0.98)

A similar pattern of results was observed for the racism scale:  $F_{(3, 160)} = 6.750$ ,  $p < .001$ , with the linear contrast ( $F_{(1, 160)} = 9.244$ ,  $p < .05$ ) as well as the cubic one ( $F_{(1, 160)} = 6.939$ ,  $p < .05$ ) being significant. Thus, the lowest score of racism is observed in the Combined condition while the highest is in the Control condition. However, the cubic model shows that the linear model is not perfect, as the mere Public Apologies condition yields a racism score as high as the Control condition. These results also allow verifying the fourth hypothesis, suggesting that the combination of the two manipulations would report the highest scores for each dependent variable.

Our second hypothesis predicted that Public Apologies would induce a greater desire to establish a relationship with the Congolese community. Once again, our results indicate that there are differences between the conditions for this variable:  $F_{(3, 160)} = 8.048$ ,  $p < .000$ , with the linear ( $F_{(1, 160)} = 11.017$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and cubic contrasts yielding significant results ( $F_{(1, 160)} = 10.148$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This indicates that the highest score of desire for intergroup contact is observed in the Combined condition, a very high score since we used a 7-point scale. The lowest score is observed in the Control condition. However, the cubic contrast shows that the linear prediction is not perfect, as the Continued Suffering condition presents a relatively high score. Once again, our fourth hypothesis is verified since the highest score belongs to the condition where the two independent variables were combined.

Finally, our third hypothesis predicted that participants should be more motivated to support reparations in conditions where Congolese people still suffered. As predicted, there were differences among the conditions:  $F_{(3, 160)} = 3.140$ ,  $p < .05$ , and only the linear contrast was significant:  $F_{(1, 160)} = 5.625$ ,  $p < .05$ , with the highest score attained in the Combined condition and a similarly high score in the Continued Suffering condition. Once again our fourth hypothesis is verified since the highest score is observed when the independent variables are combined.



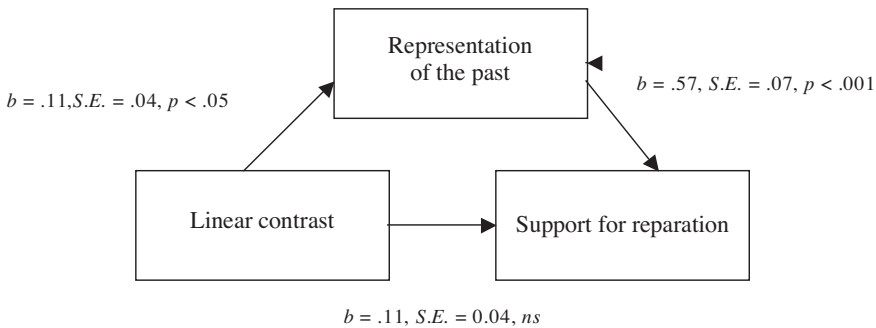
A wide range of emotions were also measured after reading the introductory text. Through a univariate analysis of variance, it was possible to observe differences among conditions for the emotion of astonishment:  $F_{(3, 160)} = 4.070, p < .05$ . It is interesting to notice that astonishment varies significantly between the Control condition and the Combined condition as indicated by the Bonferroni post hoc ( $p < .05$ ). Astonishment could be experienced in order to defend oneself. Indeed, if individuals are astonished it can free them from having to face the facts.

Collective guilt was also analyzed, however no significant differences could be observed among the various conditions. This might be caused by the severity of our items.

After these first results we decided to test the fifth hypothesis which suggests that a change of representation of the past (perception of colonization) might mediate the link between our linear contrasts and (1) a desire to support reparations, (2) a decrease of racism and (3) a desire to establish a relationship with the Congolese community. In order to test this last hypothesis, bootstrapping analyses were conducted using methods described by Preacher & Hayes (2004) for estimating direct and indirect effects with the suggested mediator. Hence, each of these dependent variables were regressed with our linear contrast as the predictor variable, while perception of colonization was entered as a proposed mediator.

The first model examined the indirect effect of the linear contrast on the desire to support reparations, through the representation of the past (Figure 1). Consistent with expectations, the indirect path was statistically significant,  $M = 0.06, S.E. = 0.02, 95\% CI [.02; .12]$ .

FIGURE 1  
Indirect effect of the linear contrast on desire to support reparations through representation of the past



The second model examined the indirect effect of the linear contrast on the decrease of racism, through the representation of the past (Figure 2). Consistent with expectations, the indirect path was statistically significant,  $M = -0.06, S.E. = .02, 95\% CI [-.12; -.02]$ .

Finally, the third model examined the indirect effect of the linear contrast on the desire to establish a relationship with the Congolese people, through the representation of the past (Figure 3). Consistent with expectations, the indirect path was statistically significant,  $M = 0.02, S.E. = 0.01, 95\% CI [.01; .05]$ .

## Discussion

The analysis shows that our experimental conditions had an important impact on the participants' attitudes and intended behaviour. Through our results we have shown that public apologies facilitate recognition of past misdeeds. This observation completes Nadler & Liviatan's (2004) study, which documented positive effects of

FIGURE 2  
*Indirect effect of the linear contrast on decrease of racism through representation of the past*

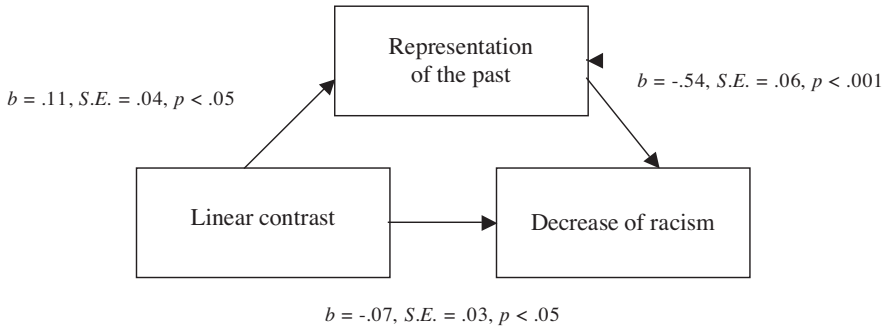
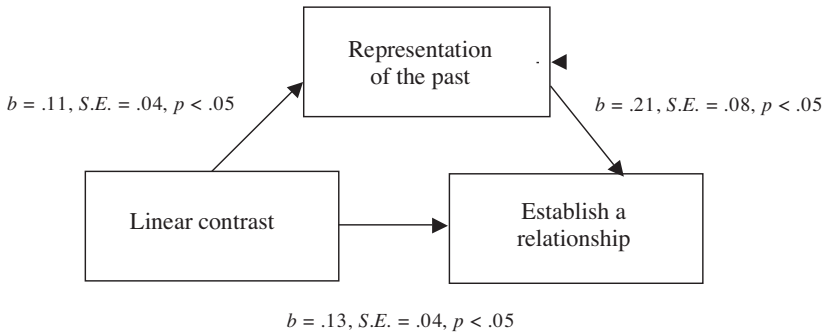


FIGURE 3  
*Indirect effect of the linear contrast on desire to establish relationships with the Congolese people through representation of the past*



public apologies among the victim group's members. The combination of public apologies and recall of victims' continued suffering seems to greatly influence ingroup members towards a better recognition of their group's past misdeeds, since public apologies reassure the members of their group's morality even if the victims are still suffering. This suggests that public apologies are efficient in alleviating cognitive dissonance among ingroup members, since it renders recognition of the group's past faults normative. Simultaneously, they indicate group members that the group is morally improving since it recognizes its faults and apologizes for them, also reassuring their social identity.

Our hypotheses concerning the effects of victims' continued suffering on the intention to finance compensations have also been verified. Perception of continued suffering strongly influenced the intention to finance compensations to repair the ingroup's past faults. Furthermore, the combination of public apologies and the recall of continued suffering increased this intention. In fact, drawing from Branscombe et al.'s (2004) and Lickel et al.'s (2004) suggestions, we expected that recognition of the past, caused by the combination of the introductory text and the expression of apologies, would increase the desire to repair the group's faults. Starzyk & Ross (2008) had already observed the importance of victim's continued suffering in the intention to repair. Our results reproduce these observations but also indicate the importance of the combination of the suffering with the apologies in order to obtain a greater level of intention.

With regards to racism towards Congolese people, we have observed that the combination of the two factors brought a greater decrease of racism compared to the

other experimental conditions. However, it is interesting to notice that racism decreased in the Combined condition but also in the Continued Suffering condition, whereas the level is relatively high in the Control condition and in the mere Public Apologies condition. This result is interesting, since we did not expect it, as we underestimated the effect of victim's continued suffering on racism. Thus, suffering seems to be an important element in the attitude of the dominants towards the defeated.

As suggested, negative perception of colonization increased when manipulations were combined. Hence, the same past is perceived differently according to the behaviour of the leader when victims are still suffering. Leaders' speeches seem to induce a desire to adopt the norm expressed in the speeches. This reminds the observation expressed by Páez et al. (2008) concerning the vision of the past: leaders' speeches appear to influence the perception of the past, our behaviour, and our attitudes towards outgroups. This could be further explained by a decrease of cognitive dissonance due to the leader's behaviour. However, it is important to notice that our study does not directly measure cognitive dissonance; hence this last observation must be further investigated.

Finally, our last results indicate that the relationship between the manipulations and the intention to support reparations and the decrease of racism is due to a change in the perception of the past. This reinforces Licata, Klein & Gurrieri's (2008) study which, by comparing representations of the past among different generations of Belgians, illustrated that change in the representation of the past is a core element when considering the Belgians' attitudes towards Congolese people.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we suggest that public apologies allow a broader vision of the past and that the victims' suffering plays an important role in the Belgians' perception of their colonization in the Congo. As Depuisset & Butera (2005) observed, patriotism in itself is not negative, but it has to be constructive rather than glorifying. The aim of the present study was to further understand the possible changes and processes involved in the attempt to recognize shameful acts committed by the ingroup in the past without producing a social identity threat. According to our results, it seems important to combine public apologies and descriptions of the continued suffering in order to obtain an important change in the perception of the past. Our results indicate that the greatest changes in attitudes and behaviour are achieved when we combine the two experimental manipulations. This puts forward that recall of continued suffering with no public apologies expressed by the leader is insufficient. Consequently, we would like to conclude by emphasizing the role of the leader in order to achieve a constructive patriotism. However, Opatow (2001) argued that reconciliation requires the cooperation between the defeated and the dominant group. Therefore, we suggest that future research should focus on the attitudes of victims towards public apologies of the dominant group.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This description was made extremely negative on purpose. Although these facts have been described as true, this is admittedly a very partial description that certainly does not apply to the whole Belgian action in the Congo.

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