

How Group Members Appraise Collective History: Appraisal Dimensions of Collective History and Their Role in In-Group Engagement

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Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2023, Vol. 11(1), 229–246, <https://doi.org/10.5964/jssp.6355>

Received: 2021-03-17 • Accepted: 2022-06-05 • Published (VoR): 2023-06-06

Handling Editor: Johanna Ray Vollhardt, Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA

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Supplementary Materials: Data, Materials [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



Abstract

Group members' appraisals of their in-group's collective history have been found to shape their engagement with the in-group and its collective goals. We add to this research by examining the complexity and dimensionality of how group members appraise collective history, and how different forms of appraisals relate to different forms of in-group engagement. We do so by (1) outlining four key dimensions – richness, clarity, valence and subjective importance – of how an in-group's collective history can be appraised, and (2) examining how these appraisal dimensions relate to group members' engagement with the in-group. Focussing on the African in-group category, we tested these ideas using a qualitative, essay writing approach. Analysis of responses (N = 33) indicated varied use of each of these dimensions of collective history appraisal, and that they relate to in-group engagement in differing ways. Two specific rhetorical strategies were identified: deploying the in-group's history as a contrast; and deploying the in-group's history as an inspiration. When collective history was appraised as rich, complex, negatively-valenced and unimportant, it was characterised as something from which the in-group should break away (history-as-contrast). Conversely, when collective history was appraised as rich, complex, positively-valenced and important, history was characterised as something to be used as a resource for the in-group (history-as-inspiration). Our findings build a fuller and more nuanced picture of how collective history shapes in-group engagement in a non-western setting.

Keywords

collective history appraisals, in-group engagement, African identity, group processes, qualitative methods

Non-Technical Summary

Background

Previous research has looked at how perceptions of 'our' group's history shape how we engage with our group (e.g., our sense of identity and willingness to act on behalf of our group). However, much of this research looks at how perceptions of a group's history vary in terms of one aspect: valence (i.e., was our history positive or negative?). Therefore, we outlined four different elements to how a group's history can be perceived: (1) valence (is our history positive, pleasant and glorious or negative, unpleasant and full of suffering?); (2) richness (is our history full of detail and stretches back over a long time?); (3) clarity (is our history clear, vivid, easy to understand, or contentious?); and (4) subjective importance (is our history something that matters to me, my group, the present day and the world in general?).



Why was this study done?

The main goal of our research was to investigate how these four elements of perceiving a group's history relate to how people engage with their group as group members. We did so in relation to African identity (i.e., among African participants).

What did the researchers do and find?

Participants were asked to write about African history with general prompts based on our four potential elements of perceiving a group's history (outlined above), and then they were also asked to write about their perceptions of the future for Africans in Africa, and how contemporary challenges facing Africa could be addressed.

Our findings demonstrated that the links between the different perceptions of group history and engagement with the group took a range of forms, and in many cases were unclear (participants made little connection between their perceptions of collective history and present-day challenges). But, other positions were clear, including "history-as-inspiration," and "history-as-contrast." In history-as-contrast, group history was perceived as rich, complex, negatively-valenced and unimportant, and therefore, the group's history was characterised as something from which the group should break away and 'forget', building instead on contemporary strengths. In contrast, history-as-inspiration involved perceiving the group's history as rich, complex, positively-valenced and important, and therefore as something to be used as a resource for the group, motivating others to act towards common goals in Africa.

What do these findings mean?

Our findings highlight (1) that perceptions of a group's history involve more elements than typically acknowledged, (2) that these in turn have complex and sometimes unclear relations with current and future engagement with the group, and (3) that group members in non-western settings may prefer to break away from their group's history to pursue a better future for their group or use their group's history as a resource for acting towards common goals.

The role of perceptions of collective history in shaping how group members engage with an in-group has been widely researched in social psychology. Two major themes are that (1) perceptions of history shape group members' relationship with their in-group (e.g., identification), and (2) group members' collective behaviours (e.g., collective political action). However, previous research has tended to focus on how specific, singular appraisal dimensions of collective history (e.g., whether in-group history is appraised as positive or negative *per se*) shape group members' engagement with the in-group. Adopting a qualitative approach in an African and African diaspora sample, we build upon this prior work by examining the complexity of appraisals of collective history, delineating different dimensions of how an in-group's history can be appraised. We then also examine how group members evoke or utilise these different dimensions of appraisal to create impetus for present and future engagement with the in-group.

We first briefly review previous research on the relevance of history to group membership, before outlining four different possible dimensions on which in-group history may be appraised (*richness*, *clarity*, *valence* and *subjective importance*), and how these appraisals may shape in-group engagement in a post-colonial African context.

Collective History and Group Membership

Representations of a group's collective history can provide group members with a resource for how to guide the group's existence, including traditions and ideologies with which to understand and interact with the world around them (de Saint-Laurent & Obradović, 2019; Liu & Hilton, 2005). These can inform group members' understanding of their group's identity, their conduct in intragroup and intergroup relations, and options for actions to address present challenges (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Liu & Khan, 2014).

Accordingly, historical narratives are used by leaders to define 'our' in-group identity in ways that mobilise group members towards specific political goals (Jetten & Wohl, 2012; Klein & Licata, 2003; Obradović & Howarth, 2018). For example, Reicher and Hopkins' (2001) analysis of political rhetoric among Scottish politicians indicates that they used accounts of Scottish history in divergent ways to mobilise Scottish people towards varying actions. For instance, politicians who favoured national independence used historical narratives of King Robert the Bruce's victory over England at Bannockburn in 1314 to affirm Scotland's perennial battle with England and to inspire the fight for

independence. Conversely, politicians who favoured unionism with Britain used King Robert the Bruce's victory at Bannockburn to affirm Scotland's equality, and to reject notions that Scotland was being treated badly in the union (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). More generally, representations of collective history can be used to develop prescriptions for the group's present and future (e.g., 'lessons'; Klar et al., 2013; or 'charters'; Liu & Hilton, 2005), and there is also evidence that the salience of a valued in-group past strengthens behavioural intentions to support the in-group and facilitates self-sacrificial behaviours (Wildschut et al., 2014).

While previous research suggests that appraisals of collective history are important in shaping group members' present and future engagement with the group, there has not been a systematic examination of the different key dimensions on which history can be appraised. This is important because previous research has extensively examined the role of appraisals of valence (i.e., the overall positivity or negativity) of the in-group's collective history on in-group engagement (e.g., Roth et al., 2017). Moreover, findings from this research also reveal inconsistencies in how appraisals of collective history relate to present and future action. On the one hand, group members can mobilise towards collective action based on appraising their group's history as negative: Licata and colleagues (2018) found that Africans who appraised colonialism as exploitative (in comparison to developmental) were more willing to seek reparations for colonial violence. On the other hand, group members' collective action tendencies can be hampered based on appraising their group's history as negative: Rabinovich and Morton (2012) found that when group members appraised their in-group's collective history as negative (compared to positive appraisals), collective action intentions were weaker. Other evidence also suggests that the connection between appraisals of collective history and group members' engagement with the in-group may not be straightforward: Makanju et al. (2020) found that watching and reflecting on video clips of either positive or negative historical representations of African identity had no significant effect on Africans' identification as African, or on their collective action intentions.

These contradictions suggest a need for a more nuanced understanding of the different ways – over and above valence – in which an in-group's collective history can be appraised, and how these different appraisals of collective history relate to group members' engagement with the in-group. We begin to address this need by delineating different key dimensions on which an in-group's history can be appraised, and examining how these appraisal dimensions relate to group members' present and future engagement with the in-group.

Appraisal Dimensions of Collective History

Drawing on a narrative review¹ of previous cross-disciplinary research and literature on the relevance of collective history to group membership, we identify four potential dimensions (further composed of twelve sub-dimensions) of the appraisals of collective history; namely *richness*, *clarity*, *valence*, and *subjective importance*.

The *richness* of an in-group's history is the appraisal of the depth and scale of the in-group's history. This dimension conceivably has two sub-dimensions of (a) *depth*; that is, how much there is to learn about the in-group's history and if any noteworthy history of the in-group exists (e.g., Bulhan, 2015); and (b) *temporality*; that is, how far back the in-group's history stretches (e.g., Sani et al., 2007).

The *clarity* of an in-group's history is the appraisal of how easy or difficult it is to characterise the in-group's history. Based on previous research, there are three possible sub-dimensions to the clarity dimension: (a) *comprehensibility*; that is, how easy or hard it is to understand the in-group's history (e.g., Adams et al., 2018), (b) *contentiousness*; that is, how contested the in-group's history is (e.g., Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), and (c) *vividness*; that is, how easy it is to visualise or bring to mind historical content of the group (e.g., Wildschut et al., 2014).

The *valence* of an in-group's history also has three possible appraisal sub-dimensions: (a) *positivity*; that is, how positive the in-group's history is perceived to be (e.g., Roth et al., 2017), (b) *pleasantness*; that is, how emotionally pleasant it is to think/hear about the in-group's history (e.g., Wildschut et al., 2014), and (3) *glory*; that is, the fortune and welfare of the in-group in terms of glory or suffering (e.g., Cinnirella, 1998).

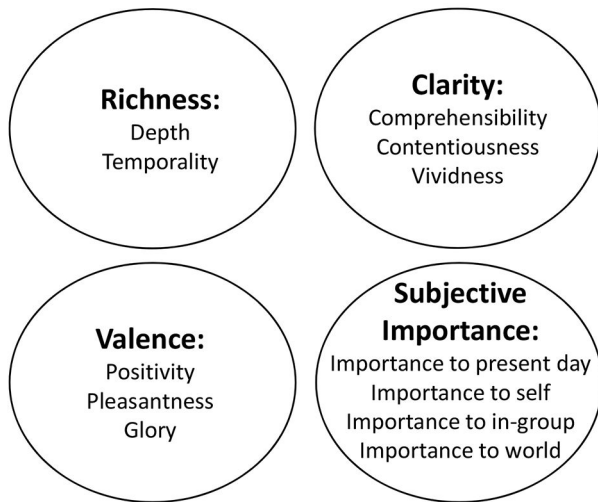
Finally, the *subjective importance* of an in-group's history has four potential sub-dimensions: (a) *importance to present day*; that is, the importance of in-group history in understanding present day circumstances (e.g., de Saint-Laurent &

1) See Table S1 in Supplementary Materials for narrative literature review summary.

Obradović, 2019), (b) *importance to self*; that is, the importance of the in-group's history to group members' self-concepts (e.g., Liu et al., 1999), (c) *importance to in-group*; that is, the perceived importance of the in-group's history to in-group members more generally (e.g., Liu & Hilton, 2005), and (d) *importance to the world*; that is, importance of the in-group's history to out-groups and the world at large (e.g., Liu, 1999). Figure 1 depicts our theorised appraisal dimensions and sub-dimensions of collective history.

Figure 1

Different Possible Appraisal Dimensions and Sub-Dimensions of Collective History



In empirical terms, we aimed to examine whether and how people talk about their group's history along these theoretical dimensions, and how such appraisals relate to in-group engagement. We use 'in-group engagement' as an umbrella term for how much people identify with the in-group (e.g., Leach et al., 2008) and want to act positively towards achieving group goals (e.g., through collective political action; Sweetman et al., 2013).

Collective History Appraisals and In-Group Engagement in a Post-Colonial Context: The Case of "African" Identity

Our argument here is that in-group engagement is shaped by the different ways in which collective history can be appraised. We examine these ideas in the context of African identity – a relatively under-researched identity within social psychology. In the African context, these appraisal processes are likely to be impacted by the history of European colonialism of Africa and its deep legacy on African identity (Bulhan, 2015). One of the key features of the colonial legacy is that colonial hegemony profoundly undermines people's understanding and appreciation of a positive, clear, rich and important collective history that pre-dates the colonial era. In this and other post-colonial contexts (which encompass the majority of the world's population), how do people appraise their collective pasts, and how do their appraisals of their collective past relate to present and future engagement with the in-group? In addressing these questions, our focus on African identity (rather than national or ethnic identities within Africa) reflects the enduring importance of a pan-African identity to anti-colonial resistance and resilience to the violence that plagued the continent through the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism. African identity remains extremely salient and relevant when Africans try to understand and interact with the world.

Previous research on appraisals of collective history in colonial contexts has also focused heavily on a colonial perpetrator perspective. For instance, research on collective guilt has examined how appraisals of historical collective wrongdoing by an in-group affect outcomes such as in-group identification, and the inclination to support collective apologies or reparation (e.g., Doosje et al., 1998). Much less research has focused on the other side of that shared colonial

history – colonial victimhood/survivorship – in terms of how collective history is appraised and relates to in-group engagement (for an example of research on social representations of collective history from an African perspective, see Cabecinhas et al., 2011). This adds further impetus to our investigation of the different dimensions (delineated above) on which collective history is appraised, and their relationship to in-group engagement in post-colonial contexts such as Africa.

The Current Research

We were particularly interested in how variations in the appraisal of Africa's collective history sit alongside perspectives on what Africa is and what it could be in the future. Therefore, we employed a qualitative essay writing approach whereby Africans (i.e., Africans living in African countries and Africans living in the diaspora) wrote essays on questions based on (1) our theorisations of the dimensions of appraisal of collective history and (2) perceptions of contemporary issues facing Africa and the future of Africa. The essay-writing design enabled participants to express themselves with relative freedom and to generate examples of historical narratives without us prompting specific narratives or events, but framed more generally by the potential appraisal dimensions. Our analysis involved a hybrid approach that was informed by our *a priori* theorisations on the appraisal dimensions of collective history, but also involved a more bottom-up approach to explore variation in how different appraisals of collective history sat alongside (and gave impetus to) different characterisations of how in-group members should engage with the in-group.

Method

Participants

Participants were 33 adults who identified as African, of whom 36.36% lived in Africa ($n = 12$) and 51.51% lived outside Africa ($n = 17$). A further 12.12% ($n = 4$) did not specify their residency. Six (i.e., 18.18%) were not born in Africa and lived in the diaspora. Participants were recruited on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and WhatsApp) initially via interpersonal contacts, then snowballed on to further contacts. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 68 years ($M = 33.28$, $SD = 13.09$). Twelve identified as female and 17 as male, whilst a further four did not report gender. Participants reported their nationality as: Nigerian (63.6%); Tanzanian (3%); Ghanaian (15.2%); Ugandan (3%); not available (3%); or missing data (12.1%). Table S2 in the [Supplementary Materials](#) contains demographic information for all participants.

Procedure

This study was conducted online, using Qualtrics. Participants were informed that the study was about their opinions on Africa, such as how they see the history of Africa. They were instructed that they could write as much as they wanted on each question, but that it was ideal to write at least 150 words for each question. Participants were then asked four main questions on how they appraise African history: 'give an account of your awareness of African history', 'generally what do you think of African history', 'how do you judge the features of African history' and 'how important is African history'. These main questions then had three or four pointer questions to guide how participants might answer them. For example, the awareness questions had four pointer questions: 'how much do you know about African history', 'does noteworthy African history exist', 'is there a lot or a little to learn about African history', and 'how far back in time do the main aspects of African history stretch'. These pointers provided (1) different sub-dimensions on which individuals might appraise African history, and (2) a probing mechanism (mirroring techniques in face-to-face interviews).

The 'give an account of your awareness of African history' question had pointer questions relating to the sub-dimensions of the *depth* and *temporality* of African history. The 'generally what do you think of African history' question had pointer questions relating to the dimensions of *positivity*, *glory*, *pleasantness* and *importance to present day*. The 'how do you judge the features of African history' question had pointer questions relating to the sub-dimensions of *comprehensibility*, *contentiousness* and *vividness*. The 'how important is African history' question had pointer questions relating to the sub-dimensions of *importance to self*, *importance to in-group* and *importance to world*.

Subsequently, participants were asked (1) to list three key things in African history; (2) about their perceptions of the future for Africans in Africa; and (3) about their thoughts on what the contemporary problems facing Africa are and what they think can be done to solve these problems. Finally, participants completed demographic information and were then thanked and debriefed on the purposes and expected outcomes of the study. The questionnaire used as presented to participants and data can be found in the [Supplementary Materials](#).

Analytic Approach

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) – which allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of a dataset by highlighting themes and patterns – was employed, combined with a rhetorical approach (e.g., Livingstone et al., 2009). This approach is the focus of the analysis we present here in more detail.

Data were coded by the first author using the Nvivo 12 package. However, all stages of the data analysis were discussed in-depth with the co-authors. Stage 1 involved reading in detail all individual responses to get familiarised with the data. Stage 2 involved coding participants' responses to collective history appraisals. This was achieved using theoretically driven themes of the dimensions of collective history appraisals identified in the introduction. The themes for the appraisals of collective history were not assumed to be mutually exclusive, and extracts that were relevant to more than one theme were coded as such. This was important because sub-dimensions were clustered on overarching questions (dimensions), meaning that participants' responses to a given question may be indicative of multiple sub-dimensions. This second stage is presented in the [Supplementary Materials](#) (see Table S3) and includes illustrative extracts of different ways in which participants characterised each sub-dimension of collective history appraisals.

Stage 3 involved coding participants' responses to Africans' possible future in Africa (see Table S4 of the [Supplementary Materials](#)), while Stage 4 involved coding and developing patterns within all individual survey responses using a rhetorical approach (e.g., Livingstone et al., 2009) to focus on how participants' accounts of how they appraised African collective history are used (or not) to create impetus for different forms of in-group (dis)engagement. This analysis of the accounts as rhetoric reveals how participants' overall narratives 'work' to create arguments for collective history being focal (or not) to in-group (dis)engagement and the action imperatives that followed from such arguments. Therefore, this stage employed bottom-up coding to explore variation in how participants made sense of collective history to engender (or not) engagement with the in-group. Additionally, Stage 4 also utilised the results of the analysis in Stage 2 when interpreting participants' response to the questions on collective history appraisals.

Stage 4 also involved exploring potential variation based on (i) African nationalities and (ii) residency (Africa or the diaspora). However, no differences based on nationalities and residency were identified in how collective history appraisals were used to facilitate in-group engagement. Discussions amongst the authors at each step informed the development of themes and patterns, meaning that the analysis was iterative (especially in Stage 4). The deliberations between the authors about the analysis were to ensure the coherence of our coding and themes. Furthermore, a realist approach to the data was utilised as we interpreted participants' responses to be indicative of their actual experiences. Below, we only present the analysis of Stage 4 due to its focus on our main research question: how appraisals of collective history relate to in-group engagement.

Analysis and Discussion

Collective History Appraisals and In-Group Engagement

The analysis indicated that participants readily drew upon and created narratives about collective history, but also that its connection to engagement with present-day challenges and the future of the group could take several quite different forms. Twenty-nine (87.88%) participants' collective history appraisals had an ambiguous relation with in-group engagement, while four (12.12%) participants' collective history appraisals had clear relations with in-group engagement. On the one hand, for two participants (P1 and P2), the mapping of appraisals onto claims about the group's future presented opposing combinations of the valence and subjective importance appraisals that coincided with expressions of pessimism or optimism about the in-group's future. Specifically, appraising in-group history as negatively-valenced

and unimportant coincided with pessimism, while appraising in-group history as positively-valenced and important coincided with optimism.

On the other hand, two participants (P8 and P31) offered a much more explicit connection between collective history and in-group engagement by openly referring to collective history as a reason for what they think should be the ideal form of engagement with the in-group. This in turn took two different forms which have not previously been acknowledged in social psychological research. First, in-group history could be appraised as something against which to *contrast* the present and future; that is, as something from which to escape or leave in the past for the better of the group: history-as-contrast. Second, in-group history could be appraised instead as something upon which to draw and use as an inspiration for the better of the group: history-as-inspiration.

In the following sections, we present the four individual participants' overall narratives to illustrate the patterns described above on how collective history related to in-group engagement. While it was not initially our goal to present individual participants' overall accounts, the patterns that were developed through the rhetorical analysis were instantiated within – and not between – individual participants' responses across the different questions. Moreover, similar collective history appraisals (identified in Stage 2 of the analysis) were shared between the individual participants' narratives described below (e.g., all four appraised African history as rich, P1 and P8 both appraised African history as negative and unimportant, etc.).

The illustrative extracts from participants below are copied unedited from participants' responses, and instances of '...' indicate a break between sections of the extracts. The first pair of accounts (P1 and P2²) illustrate the contrasting forms of collective history appraisal that were related either to pessimism or optimism about the in-group's future (see Figure 2). The second pair of accounts (P8 and P31) illustrate the specific history-as-contrast and history-as-inspiration narratives that these participants presented (see Figure 3). These examples illustrate the patterns or relations between collective history appraisals and in-group engagement developed in the analysis; that is, no other meaningful patterns or relationships were discernible following the analysis.

Figure 2

Opposing Collective History Appraisal Forms That Are Related Either to Pessimism or Optimism About the In-Group's Future

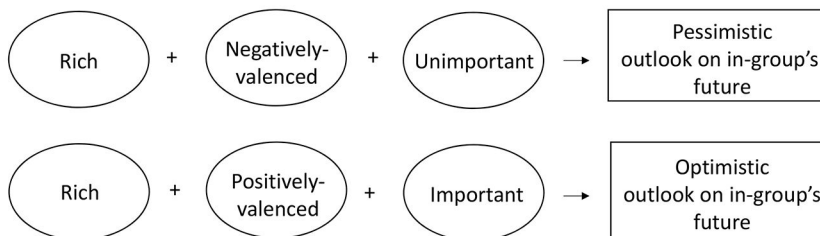
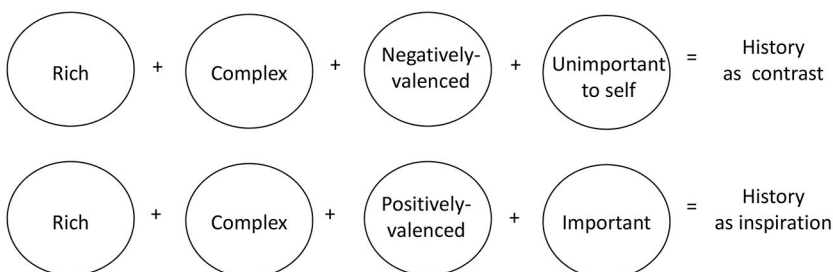


Figure 3

Opposing Collective History Appraisal Forms That Characterise History Either as a Contrast or an Inspiration



2) Incidentally, in the two essays used to illustrate this part of the analysis, these participants (P1 and P2) did not interact with the clarity dimension.

Collective History Appraisals and Pessimism for the Future: Participant 1 (P1)

P1 is a 27-year-old man who was born in Africa, and is a permanent resident and citizen of Nigeria. His African nationality is Nigerian and his ethnicity is Yoruba. P1's account involved appraising African history as *rich, negatively-valenced and unimportant*. In this account, African history is characterised as unbeneficial to Africa. Moreover, P1 appraised African history in unambiguously negative terms which, he suggests, is echoed in the lack of progressiveness in some African societies today:

...there will be many elaborate and well documented accounts of African culture, practices, and landscapes... hence, there is probably a huge body of knowledge relating to African culture and history...

(P1; Q1 response³)

I know very little, besides the more popular aspects such as slave trade..., I do not see any immediate or long-term benefit or value in understanding the history of Africa.

(P1; Q1 response)

By and large, African history has been cast as negative. This is owing to the fact that Africans have typically been painted as primitive, intellectually inferior and uncivilized... Sometimes, these negative history has been justified because for example, many African cultures still exist whereby people live nomadic lifestyles. In addition, several cultural practices and marriage rites were backward and are still backward.

(P1; Q2 response)

Furthermore, P1 articulates Africa's current problems as a collective action problem arising from poor leadership and corruption. Hence, he calls on Africans to embrace education and forsake free-riding to contribute to the advancement of their societies. This articulation of Africa's current problems corresponds to P1 perceiving a pessimistic future for Africa because of a lack of progress:

Poor leadership and corruption are the primary issues upon which all the other problems... are dependent. Also many Africans are unwilling to contribute or be productive for the development of their nations... A few solutions includes: A overhaul of the judicial system in order to ensure they are capable of prosecuting those charged effectively. Standard education which will help give exposure to the general populace... The populace should get more involved in politics in order for political parties to produce more viable and enlightened candidates.

(P1; Q7 response)

At the moment, the future is bleak, simply because there is very little progress in sight.

(P1; Q6 response)

P1's pessimism about Africa's ability to face up to big problems facing the in-group happens in the context of his appraisals of African history as being unimportant to the in-group and having a predominantly justified negative history. In other words, appraisals about an unimportant and negatively-valenced African history coincided with pessimism about Africa's inability to deal with contemporary problems in the future.

Collective History Appraisals and Optimism for the Future: Participant 2 (P2)

P2 is a 31-year-old man who was born in, and is a permanent resident and citizen of Nigeria. His African nationality is Nigerian and his ethnicity is Igbo. P2's account involved appraising African history as *rich, positively-valenced and important*, emphasising Africa's contribution to science and technology and African history as a source of a positive self-conception:

³) Q1, Q2 response means response to Question 1, Question 2 etc.

The history of Africa can be traced to thousands of years before Christ... Some notable inventions that revolutionized the world could be traced to Africa...

(P2; Q1 response)

...African history...has a very strong positive one especially attributing it to the civilization era. the history has been that of sweetness, bliss and hospitality until the unfortunate incident of the slave trade upsurge. the history of Africa will ring a positive bell in my heart considering the fact that Africa has contributed immensely to the growth and development of science and technology.

(P2; Q2 response)

The African history is quite important to me as an individual especially as an in-group member. this is because the African history gives me a sense of selfworth, positive self-image and healthy self-esteem. the history of the world will have some form of vacuum and may take a void shape without the African history complementing it. that is how important the AFRICAN HISTORY IS TO ME.

(P2; Q4 response)

Similar to P1, P2's articulation of the contemporary problems facing Africa point to poor leadership and corruption but also highlights Africa's battle with self-determination and ongoing need for emancipation (from neo-colonialism). This characterises an 'independent' Africa still fighting for independence. However, P2's articulation of current problems corresponds with an optimistic characterisation of Africa's future, hinging on Africans adopting behaviours that will benefit the common good of Africa and gaining independence from neo-colonialism, and by extension, external interference in its polities:

The contemporary issues facing Africa now are but are not limited to terrorism, agitation for self determination, bad and corrupt leadership, neo-slavery, economic challenges.

(P2; Q7 response)

The future is bright for Africa and Africans. This, assertion may come to fruition if... 1... the African fathers could come together to pursue a common goal and vision that would make Africa to have a facelift in the world scene. 2... the continent would break free from the neo-colonialism web it has been entangled in. 3... the entire Africans can lay down their individualistic and selfish orientations and pursue a collective goal that will move Africa forward...

(P2; Q6 response)

Altogether, P2's optimism about Africa's ability to face up to the big problems facing the in-group happens in the context of his appraisals of African history being important to his self-conception and having a definitively positive history. In other words, appraisals of an important and positively-valenced African history coincide with optimism about Africa's ability to deal with contemporary problems in the future.

History-as-Contrast: Participant 8 (P8)

P8 is an 18-year-old woman who was born in Africa, and although currently residing in the United Kingdom, she is a permanent resident and citizen of Tanzania. Her ethnicity is Chaga and Kisii (Kisii is her additional Kenyan ethnicity). P8's appraisals of African history emphasised history as something against which to contrast, to build a positive sense of the group. She appraised African history as rich, complex, negatively-valenced and unimportant to the self.

Rich History — P8 characterised the richness of African history by appealing to intangible and transcendent aspects of African life (e.g., culture, food, etc.). This appraisal communicates an appreciation of current aspects of African life and not necessarily historical content. P8's appraisal of richness is also one of *vastness* regarding the number of countries that make up the continent of Africa. Furthermore, P8 appraises African history as *long-lived*, albeit with some unclear detail. This appraisal reflects a rich history that is not well documented:

I do believe that noteworthy African history exists... the riches of Africa, the beauty, culture, food and so much more... There is so much to learn about African history, if we just consider the simple fact that we are talking about a whole continent and not a country then this alone should highlight how much there is to learn... I do feel it goes back thousands of years but I do not feel it is well documented... I feel that the history dating back hundreds of years ago is better documented.

(P8; Q1 response)

Complex History — P8 also characterised African history as complex, but in a manner that presents a dilemma in terms of the comprehensibility of African history, and which ultimately communicates difficulty around understanding aspects of African history. P8 also appraises African history as contentious owing to misinformation, and as difficult to visualise. This latter appraisal specifically invoked the difficulty in emotional terms of recollecting a negative past:

...While I do not know much about the history of Africa as a whole, I believe it can be complex in some cases and straightforward in others, I cannot really explain why I feel this way. It is very controversial, many people would disagree about the real history of Africa, many people would find it hard to believe that Africa is actually not as bad as the media portrays it to be. Is it hard to visualize? Yes and No, sometimes it is hard to visualize when I think of the hardships, for example; when I think of slavery, and even the good things are hard to visualize. However, some aspects are easier to visualize than other.

(P8; Q3 response)

Negatively-Valenced History — While P8 did highlight some positive aspects of African 'history', these aspects are actually either contemporary or non-specific in terms of historical content. Instead, they are an appeal to positive aspects of African culture rather than aspects of its history. P8's appraisal implies that the more well-known negative history can be contrasted with less well-known positive characteristics of African culture. That is, the ambivalent appraisal communicates more specifically that what Africa can and should be known for should be contrasted with its widely-known negative history:

The African history that is most spoken about is in my opinion generally negative while it should be positive because there is so much beauty and goodness in Africa. Most of the history that is publicized is of suffering, you will hear about war, famine and so on - while there is so much happiness and joy and I feel like that is what may people don't realize about Africa - people are so happy, whilst there are problems do not get me wrong, but people are happy... ...African history... is mostly unpleasant. I feel this is because we only get to see one side of the coin. But if we looked deeper... you realize it is actually not all bad - you realize Africa is so beautiful and pleasant.

(P8; Q2 response)

History as Unimportant to the Self — P8's appraisal of the importance of African history is ambivalent, characterising African history as important to the present day, the world, and other Africans, but not to her self-concept. P8's appraisal of the unimportance of African history to her self-concept makes a distinction between history and culture by asserting that culture is important to how she sees herself, but not history:

In terms of relevance, I believe a lot of the history explains/helps in understanding why things are the way they are.

(P8, female, Tanzanian; Q2 response)

African history is very very important to human and world history, I mean Africa is the mother land... Is African history important to how I see myself. Yes and no - Some aspects yes but with some I would say no... I would say some of the culture back home is more important to how I see myself than the history is. African history to other Africans is very important but I feel the

importance has faded over the past years - especially in the case of people who have lived outside the continent..

(P8; Q4 response)

Contemporary Problems Facing Africa – P8 asserts that the only problem facing Africa is its preoccupation with its history. This calls on Africa to break away from its past in a bid to utilise the continent's present human and cultural resources through education:

Focusing on the past. Not seeing the beauty in the beautiful things that we have (the minds, creativity and so much more). We need to be educated about our countries and how brilliant and beautiful they are.

(P8; Q7 response)

Perception of the Future of Africa – P8's characterisation of Africa's future is one of success if the continent can break away from its past and build on Africans' native intelligence and rich indigenous culture:

The future is bright if we stop looking at the past and focus on all the brilliance and beauty of our countries and culture.

(P8; Q6 response)

Altogether, P8's account indicates deep ambivalence in which negative historical experiences of the African people are contrasted with positive aspects of African culture. The broad importance of African history to many people was also contrasted with her distancing from that history. This combination underpins her call for African history to be used as a contrast – something to break away from for the benefit of Africa's future. In this way she builds the rhetorical position: we (i.e., others who place importance on history) need to break free from this negatively-weighted history and focus on more positive cultural aspects to have a better future.

History-as-Inspiration: Participant 31 (P31)

P31 is a 44-year-old man who was born in Africa, currently and permanently resides in Australia, but is a citizen of Nigeria. His ethnicity is Yoruba. P31's appraisals of African history (in contrast to P8) emphasised history as something upon which to build a positive sense of the group, characterising African history as rich, complex, positively-valenced and important.

Rich History – P31's appraisal of the richness of African history involves explicit intergroup comparison whereby African history is characterised as richer and older than that of other continents (arguably providing a claim for positive distinctiveness; *Tajfel & Turner, 1979*). P31 also characterises African history as well-established and long-lived:

African history is as rich as, if not to say richer than, the history of Europe, Asia and the Americas. I am aware of the input Africa and Africans have made to the high ancient cultures of Europe and the Americas... Then there are various other empires/civilisations across the rest of Africa. All these have some level of records that go back to as early as 4500 BC... Much of the "great civilisations" of the ancient world were actually taught or learned from African civilisation.

(P31; Q1 response)

Complex History – P31 also appraises African history as complex but anchored in the politics of history telling. P31 asserts that outgroups have manipulated the history of Africa. This appraisal serves to call Africans to research African history to avoid being misguided or misinformed. P31 also appraises African history as difficult to visualise. This appraisal points out issues of adequate knowledge and understanding of how African history relates to the present, and serves to buttress the action impetus for Africans to engage more with African history:

...there are political positions that mitigate against honest, truthful, and transparent discussion/analysis of African history. This is the political position of the West that had to propagate

lies about Africans in order to facilitate its designs to carry out the mass enslavement and dehumanisation of Africans... Thus African history would remain more complex than it should, until Africans begin to take a keen interest in its own history and conduct its own research into this. As regards the ease of visualising African history I consider this in two ways 1. Being able to picture events in mind: this is largely difficult, non-existent as a lot of Africans have very little information about their history. 2. Being able to understand the flow of actions and actors, the actions-reactions sequences and how they lead to where things are today...I think a lot of Africans find this a bit difficult as they can't see parallels between where things are today to what has caused by viewing the same action-reaction... sequence...

(P31; Q3 response)

Positively-Valenced History — P31's appraisal of the valence of African history involved distinguishing between 'old' and 'contemporary' periods of history. As an example of their positive appraisal of 'old' African history, P31 emphasises the influence of African civilisation on other civilisations. Similar to P8's characterisation, P31 also highlights the perpetuation of negative aspects of African history – 'contemporary' African history – for the gain of outgroups. Overall, P31's appraisal communicates that 'old', authentic African history is positive, even though such histories are not always attributed to Africa:

There are two sets of African history, that which is contemporary and is generally negative and that which is older and generally not identified to be African. As an example of the second set the Egyptian civilisation is hardly ever portrayed as African... Of the former set popular media generally focuses on the negative aspects of the African experience as that plays to the gallery and also helps their personal financial agenda (they are in business to make money). When you apply both of these together you get people you say Africa has added nothing to world history, civilisation and I wonder then what was the Egyptian civilisation and what it added to the Greek and Roman civilisations of the West and Mesopotamia of the East.

(P31; Q2 response)

History as Important — P31 characterises African history as important to the present day, the self, other Africans, and the world. The importance of African history to the present day is that it enlightens people on how the current challenges facing Africa arose; namely, through interference from outgroups (e.g., colonialism; the transatlantic slave trade). This appraisal mainly blames Africa's current challenges on external factors. This account functions to appeal to individuals to engage in-depth in African history to fully grasp the current African context:

...there is the analysis of what caused where Africa is today. From analysing the impact of centuries of attacks, incursions from Europe and Asia, the rise of the Sahara, the impact of the trans-Saharan slave trade to the trans-Atlantic slave trade spanning over a thousand years of slave trading in Africans. How any civilisation can survive all these and remain unscathed is what the world does not discuss. Rather it perpetuates the current situation as though this is what has always been, or even what they met on ground when the West started interacting with us. This is not allowed to see the light of day for the generality of people...

(P31; Q4 response)

Furthermore, P31's appraisal of the importance of African history to the world involves an appeal to universal values of truth and justice, calling on the world to embrace these values in recollecting the history of Africa to improve intergroup relations. This again places an onus on Africans to acquire knowledge of 'real' African history:

African history is the history of the world. If Africa is the cradle of human life and the cradle of human civilisation, then its history IS the history of the world. ...the day the world begins to take actual truthful interest in African history that is the day a higher level of justice being to prevail world over... I see myself as myself first and foremost then as African. However I do desire people

around to be better informed about the African experience in order to foster better relations... I think a lot of other Africans are more easily negatively impacted by the negative outlook on the African image. I think this is largely due to a lack of knowledge of real African history and the understanding of how this history has shaped where Africa is today and how it is still shaping it into the future.

(P31; Q4 response)

Contemporary Problems Facing Africa — P31's characterisation of the problems facing Africa also encourages Africans to research their identity and history in order to resolve self-image issues and to aid African polities:

Image/Self-image I think this is probably the area requiring greatest attention. Africans need to take time to understand themselves - who they are, who other Africans are, who Africans in the diaspora are, what our individual and joint histories are, and re-imagine ourselves in a positive light. Then begin to (actually simultaneously) work to address the negative image, information that Africa has with the rest of the World... Political Africans need to understand that the system of politics it has inherited from the West needs to be re-evaluated, keep what is positive and practical for it as well look inward to apply good practices from its own political structures/frameworks that it had before the incursion of the West.

(P31; Q7 response)

Perception of Africa's Future — P31's characterisation of the future of Africa is bleak if Africa does not engage with African history, emphasising African history as an important resource on which to draw for the future:

Continued manipulation and enslavement by the rest of the world, except: 1. It begins to take interest in its own history. Researching such histories itself, teaching this to its next generations and ensuring they continue to take interest and pride in their rich history 2. It begins to debunk the lies that have been perpetrated and are still being perpetrated about it. 3. It begins to learn from its history and past mistakes, errors, etc.

(P31; Q6 response)

Altogether, P31 draws upon appraisals of a positive and important collective history to create impetus in others to act towards common goals in Africa. This combination underlines his call for history to be viewed as an inspiration – something to draw on for the benefit of the group's future, building the rhetorical position: we need to embrace and draw inspiration from our positive and prestigious history to have a better future.

In summary, the narratives of P8 and P31 indicate that different appraisals of collective history can be drawn upon explicitly to build impetus to engage with present day challenges and imagine a positive future for the group – but that this can be done in sharply contrasting ways, characterising history as something from which to break free, or from which to draw inspiration.

Implications for Understanding How Collective History Is Appraised and Used

Across the analysis, participants' characterisations of Africa's ability to deal with contemporary problems co-occurred with different ways of appraising Africa's history. Pessimism for the future coincided with appraisals of collective history as negatively-valenced and unimportant; whereas a more optimistic outlook coincided with appraisals of collective history as positively-valenced and important. This points to the relevance of collective history appraisals in group members' beliefs about the in-group's ability to address contemporary problems. Indeed, perceptions of group efficacy are pivotal in engendering collective political action among in-group members to improve the in-group's affairs (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2004). More importantly, this finding provides evidence for the *different dimensions* along which collective history is appraised, and that different combinations of these appraisal dimensions 'work' to provide contrasting answers to contemporary challenges.

Our findings extend previous research in social psychology regarding the relevance of a group's past to in-group engagement in the present and into the future (e.g., Liu & Hilton, 2005). This previous work has tended to focus on how collective history can be used as a tool to inspire in-group engagement or to prescribe and legitimise behaviour in the present (e.g., Klar et al., 2013; Liu & Hilton, 2005), but without explicitly examining the multi-dimensionality of appraisals of history beyond its valence (e.g., Roth et al., 2017). Our findings suggest that in addition to an appraisal of a positively-valenced collective history, a clear *history-as-inspiration* narrative also involved appraising collective history as *rich*, *complex*, and *subjectively important* (to the self, present day, in-group – i.e., other Africans – and the world). This more nuanced analysis suggests that the extent to which collective history can be drawn upon overtly to inspire current and future engagement depends on that history not only being characterised as positive, but also as rich and subjectively important – neither of which are inherent to an appraisal of positivity *per se*. As a counterfactual, characterising in-group history as positive and glorious, but also as irrelevant, provides less coherent impetus to draw on that history to shape the present and future.

It was also apparent that characterisations of history could be used to urge greater in-group engagement in a very different way: as something from which to break free and contrast with in the present and future. This *history-as-contrast* narrative involved appraising collective history as *rich*, *complex*, *negatively-valenced* and *subjectively unimportant to the self*, and contrasting the group's past with positive aspects of the group's immediate existence (e.g., culture) as a means of building in-group engagement. This could conceivably be characterised as a modernist or even futurist conception of in-group identity, in which the in-group's collective future is best achieved by explicitly rejecting its past. However, history-as-contrast, where the group is occupied with breaking away from the past, may have a significant impact on strategies of in-group engagement such as seeking reparations. This is because history-as-contrast is different to other historical positions – e.g., historical closure (Hanke et al., 2013) and privity (Starzyk & Ross, 2008) – which may use the ongoing effects of an in-group's past trauma and victimisation as an impetus to seek reparations from an outgroup perpetrator. Therefore, history-as-contrast in our findings is an ahistorical means of dealing with the group's negative history and present challenges, and may involve rejecting claims of victimhood (as opposed to notions like perpetual in-group victimhood orientation; Schori-Eyal, Klar, & Ben-Ami, 2017).

Correspondingly, the salience of an in-group's negative past leads to historical discontinuity in a bid to bolster a positive social identity for the in-group (Roth et al., 2017). This is theoretically relevant in two different ways. First, it suggests that in combination with other appraisals, emphasising an in-group's negative history can potentially function as a spur to *greater* in-group engagement, rather than leading straightforwardly to disengagement (cf. Rabinovich & Morton, 2012). Second, it emphasises the relevance of examining how collective history is appraised and used in post-colonial contexts in which people's sense of an indigenous, positive collective history has been eroded (Bulhan, 2015, 1985b; Rodney, 2012), and in which a history-as-contrast perspective may have greater potency than in the 'coloniser' or WEIRD contexts typically studied in social psychology. This is echoed by Licata and colleagues' (2018) findings in an African context that showed appraising in-group's history as negative led to greater engagement with the in-group. However, our findings differ in key ways from those of Licata and colleagues: in their study, it was the appraisal of colonialism as being exploitative that engendered in-group engagement in the African context. Conversely, in our study, the appraisal of colonialism as an excuse that Africans give for the cause of present challenges was deployed to encourage Africans to not dwell on the past in order to make progress for the future as part of a history-as-contrast narrative.

Importantly, history-as-contrast involves a *combination* of appraisals, including of collective history being unimportant to an in-group member's self-concept (or identity). This suggests that the sub-dimension of (un)importance to in-group members' self-concepts may take precedence over the sub-dimensions of the importance of collective history to the present day, other in-group members, and the world. More broadly, this shows the necessity of differentiating between sub-dimensions of an appraisal dimension to fully understand the specific relevance of collective history to group membership.

The history-as-contrast account also echoes findings by Klein et al. (2012) in the context of Belgian linguistic conflict for the legitimisation of autonomy versus interdependence goals between Dutch- and French-speaking Belgians. On the one hand, Dutch-speakers, who were in the past not well-off and dependent on French-speakers in contrast to their present self-reliance, used collective history to legitimise calls for political and financial autonomy from French-speak-

ers. On the other hand, French-speakers, who in the past were well-off and helped Dutch-speakers in contrast to their present dependency, used collective history to legitimise calls for political and financial interdependence between them and Dutch-speakers. There are nevertheless key differences between this and the history-as-contrast strategy identified in our study. History-as-contrast in our study was employed as an ahistorical or modernistic stance to facilitate in-group engagement as claims were made for the in-group to break away from its history to establish itself in the present and into the future. Conversely, in Klein and colleagues' study, history-as-contrast was employed to promote specific historical narratives of the in-group to shape present day in-group engagement.

Limitations and Future Research

One potential limitation of our research was that our methodology did not allow us to probe deeper into the majority of participants' responses whose narratives were ambiguous regarding the relationship between appraisals of collective history and in-group engagement. Hence, future research could employ a conversational approach (e.g., face-to-face interviews) to clarify and understand the nature of such responses. Moreover, another limitation, potentially related to the former, may be that our materials did not explicitly ask participants questions on the relationship between collective history and in-group engagement. This was deliberate in that it did not assume there to be a link, limiting the demand characteristics that may have resulted. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the reason for ambiguity about the relationship between collective history appraisals and in-group engagement for most participants was due to the lack of explicit questioning. Hence, future research could employ more direct questioning of the relationship between collective history and in-group engagement to examine if other patterns can be unravelled.

Another related explanation for ambiguous responses on the relationship between collective history appraisals and in-group engagement for most of our participants may be that participants were not used to interacting in meaningful ways with African history. Specifically, a considerable number of participants explicitly reflected on their lack of knowledge about African history and the fact that this history was not taught adequately as a subject in primary and secondary education. Hence, future research can adopt a design where participants would be exposed to in-depth narratives of African history before being asked to reflect on its links (or otherwise) with Africa's present and future.

Another potential methodological limitation is our sample of participants and the language of instruction of our study (i.e., English), and by extension, the generalisability of our findings to other (non-speaking English) African countries. Specifically, the majority (66.66%) of our participants' African nationality was Nigerian (Nigeria was colonised by Britain), and the remainder of our participants' African nationalities were Tanzanian, Ghanaian and Ugandan (countries also colonised by Britain). Therefore, there is a question as to whether our findings generalise to other African countries that had other (non-British) European colonisers, and by extension, speak languages other than English. We agree that the experience of colonialism across African countries was nuanced depending on the colonial authorities that governed a specific African territory. However, the violent and exploitative implementation and outcome of colonialism in Africa (e.g., racism, erosion of indigenous peoples' history, bleeding of economic and natural resources etc.) sparked independence struggles that had an explicitly pan-African dimension, and post-colonial challenges and problems (e.g., dependency on the West, political instability, etc.) are shared by most African countries (Bulhan, 2015; Rodney, 2012). Therefore, our findings present a good step in understanding how collective history appraisals shape in-group engagement in Africa. Nonetheless, future research is essential to capture the nuance that may exist in different African countries due to varying colonial authorities and linguistic differences. Moreover, future research in the African context should explore how collective history appraisals relate to in-group engagement in African countries that had a lesser (though violent) colonial history (e.g., Ethiopia).

Other priorities for future research should include developing quantitative measures of how people appraise their collective history that consider the complexity of the relationships between the different appraisal dimensions of collective history identified in our research. This calls for a multi-dimensional approach in assessing the appraisals of collective history, which will open up research opportunities to test a measure of appraisals of collective history across varied cultures and contexts. Ultimately, such a measure will further aid our understanding of the relevance of collective history to group membership and engagement.

Conclusion

The present findings shed light on the different dimensions on which group members can appraise their collective history, and how these appraisals may shape in-group engagement. They are consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of appraisals of collective history, but suggest in turn that in particular contexts, such as post-colonial Africa, collective history can be relevant in quite differing ways: as an inspiration – something for the in-group to aspire to; or as a contrast – something for the in-group to break away from. While collective historical continuity is important, our findings build a fuller and more nuanced picture of how collective history may, or may not, shape in-group engagement in a non-western setting.

Funding: The authors have no funding to report.

Acknowledgments: The authors have no support to report.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Data Availability: For this article, a data set is freely available (Makanju, Livingstone, & Sweetman, 2022).

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the following items (for access see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#) below):

- Summary table of narrative literature review that inspired theorisations on possible appraisal dimensions and sub-dimensions of collective history (Table S1)
- Demographic information for all participants (Table S2)
- Summary table of illustrative quotes demonstrating the different dimensions and sub-dimensions of the appraisal of collective history (Table S3)
- Coding of participants' responses to Africans' possible future in Africa (Table S4)
- Questionnaire used as presented to participants
- Data collected from participants

Index of Supplementary Materials

Makanju, D., Livingstone, A. G., & Sweetman, J. (2022). *Supplementary materials to "How group members appraise collective history: Appraisal dimensions of collective history and their role in in-group engagement"* [Research data, questionnaire, and additional information]. OSF. <https://osf.io/ey84t>

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