On the Outcomes of Intergroup Apologies: A Review

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Abstract
Governments and political groups around the world are increasingly offering apologies to atone for past injustices. In recent years social psychologists have begun to empirically explore whether these apologies improve intergroup relations. We organize this literature into a framework outlining potential outcomes of intergroup apologies, mediators of those outcomes, and circumstances that allow those outcomes to be realized. Psychologists have focused most of their efforts around the questions of whether and when intergroup apologies elicit forgiveness and foster positive intergroup attitudes. Thus, in addition to outlining the present state of knowledge on intergroup apologies, this framework highlights areas that require further research; most notably, the model makes evident that we know little about what psychological states mediate intergroup apology effects.

Many modern conflicts have their roots in historical wounds. For example, conflicts between Sinhalese and Tamil in Sri Lanka, between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, and between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland are connected to memories of past harms. Violent conflict is not the only outcome of past injustice, past harms also fuel ongoing disadvantage (Galtung, 1969). For instance, indigenous Australians and Canadians die younger, experience more disease, have higher unemployment, earn less money, and have higher infant death rates than Whites living in those same countries (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008; Canada’s Performance Report, 2005). Though it is an oversimplification to suggest that any single historical event determines the present day circumstances of any of these groups, the historical mistreatment and subjugation of indigenous populations contributes to this inequality. In recent years, scholars from a variety of disciplines have sought to understand how to redress historical harms in order to dampen the unfortunate effects of historical injustices on the present.

More and more commonly, governments and political groups are redressing historical harms by offering official public apologies. For example, in 2008, both the Australian and Canadian governments apologized for removing indigenous children from their families and placing them in group homes in an effort to eradicate Indigenous culture. In Rwanda, a reconciliation commission served, in part, as a platform for apologies from aggressors to victim group members. And in Northern Ireland/the north of Ireland, the time known as “the troubles” has ceased and both the IRA and some Protestant paramilitary groups have apologized for some of the events they perpetrated in the conflict (CLMC Ceasefire, 1994; IRA apology, 2002).

In this paper, we review the existing social psychological literature on the effects of intergroup apologies and propose a framework to organize research in the area. We classify the existing literature into known and possible outcomes of intergroup apologies as well as mediators and moderators of those effects. That is, we discuss the possible mechanisms through which intergroup apologies affect intergroup relations; we identify known
outcomes of intergroup apologies; finally, we examine the conditions that affect whether intergroup apologies help intergroup relations. This framework, which can be viewed in Figure 1, identifies many gaps in the current literature. For instance, although we propose that apologies are more effective if they are seen as sincere and the apologizing group is seen as remorseful, there is presently no empirical evidence suggesting what does and what does not mediate intergroup apology effectiveness.

We focus on what is known about apologies offered from one group to another group rather than apologies offered from one person to another. We believe that intergroup apologies pose obstacles and elicit psychological motivations not present for interpersonal apologies, so should be considered separately. Nevertheless, we use the interpersonal apology literature to inform this review, particularly when we discuss questions intergroup apology researchers are yet to explore.

Psychological Needs Served by Intergroup Apologies

Why do victim groups desire apologies? Why do perpetrator groups offer them? Why might apologies promote peace once offered? Surprisingly, very little psychological research has examined what psychological needs intergroup apologies serve. Scholars from a number of other disciplines, however, have attempted to answer these questions. Lazare (2004) proposes that intergroup apologies work because they restore power and dignity to the victim, affirm that the perpetrator group believes in norms of fair treatment and justice, and show that the perpetrator group has suffered. Similarly, Thompson (2008) has said that, ultimately, intergroup apologies work because they restore power and dignity to the victim group. She claims that all of the other needs, such as affirming norms of justice, can be served through other redress measures, such as acknowledging harms and punishing offenders. de Grieff (2008) argues that the primary goal of intergroup apologies is to restore victim’s belief that societal institutions are trustworthy. In his opinion, remorse is critical because, by expressing remorse, the perpetrator group indicates that

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.png)

**Figure 1** Summary framework of the present state of social psychological knowledge on intergroup apologies and their effects.
they adhere to the norms violated by the transgression, thus affirming that societal institutions can be trusted to act justly and fairly in the future.

Tavuchis (1991) claims that intergroup apologies work instead because the perpetrator group acknowledges the injustice and accepts responsibility for it. Intergroup apologies place blame on the perpetrator in a public record, which sets the groundwork for reconciliation. In contrast to de Grieff (2008), Tavuchis claims that remorse is irrelevant because group leaders act officially on behalf of others, so cannot genuinely express their sorrow. Also, because group leaders need to apologize publicly, formally, and ceremoniously, true remorse is difficult to communicate. Because the ceremony which must surround an official public apology lacks the intimacy required to express true remorse, intergroup apologies are “couched in abstract, remote, measured, and emotionally neutral terms” (Tavuchis, 1991, pp. 102–103).

The question of whether remorse is critical or irrelevant to intergroup apology effectiveness can be tested empirically. In a relevant study, Philpot and Hornsey (in press) found that Australian, Malaysian, and Filipino memory for Japan’s apologies for World War II offences was linked to increased forgiveness for the Japanese military. This increased forgiveness seems to have arisen because those who remembered the apology saw Japan as more remorseful for their actions, suggesting that remorse can be critical to intergroup apology effects. However, the correlational nature of this study makes it difficult to be confident as to the direction of this effect. This research is also limited in that it did not investigate the role of other potential mediators.

The competing claims of what mediates intergroup apology effects makes clear that further research is needed on what psychological needs intergroup apologies serve. We do, however, know a little more about the types of effects intergroup apologies have, which we discuss in the next section.

Outcomes of Intergroup Apologies

Forgiveness

We have learned the most about the outcomes of intergroup apologies from a series of experimental studies examining whether or not these apologies encourage forgiveness. So far the evidence is mixed. Brown, Wohl, and Exline (2008) manipulated whether or not the United States government apologized to Canada for the friendly fire deaths of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan. The apology increased how forgiving participants felt towards the United States military, as indicated by a reduced desire for avoidance and revenge (McCullough et al., 1998). In a separate series of studies, Philpot and Hornsey (2008) tested whether apologies offered to Australia by various perpetrator groups aroused forgiveness. These studies examined a number of offenses, including harming the environment, financially supporting terrorists, human rights abuses, corporate malpractice, and doping Olympic athletes. In all contexts, apologies did not promote forgiveness. Even when the authors tried to enhance the effectiveness of the apologies by increasing the emotionality of the apology, by allowing participants a week to process the apology, or by including statements from direct victims encouraging forgiveness, the apology still did not elicit forgiveness (Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). These conflicting results suggest that intergroup apologies can lead to intergroup forgiveness under some circumstances, but not under others; the friendly fire incident was recent and unintended, whereas the incidents explored by Philpot and Hornsey were historical and intended. We explore these and other moderators of intergroup apology effects in more detail in later sections.
Intergroup attitudes

Even though members of groups previously victimized by intentional injustices may be reluctant to forgive, they may still desire to have amicable relations with the perpetrator group. For example, present day victims of groups targeted in the Holocaust could refuse to forgive the Nazi perpetrators but not hold present day Germans responsible for these events. Some scholars argue that intergroup apologies for intentional historical injustices are intended to elicit feelings and thoughts other than forgiveness in part because requesting forgiveness asks too much of victims (de Grieff, 2008; Hamber, 2007; Minow, 1998; Tavuchis, 1991). For instance, de Grieff (2008) argues that the goal of an intergroup apology is to make “trustworthy institutions trusted” (pg. 120). By apologizing, a government or group affirms the laws, norms, and unstated rules violated by the transgression, thereby demonstrating their commitment to adhering to the standards of justice and fair treatment in the future (Kay et al., 2007; Lerner, 1980).

Some empirical evidence suggests that apologies can improve intergroup thoughts and feelings other than forgiveness. Nadler and Liviatan (2006) randomly assigned Israeli students to read or not read statements of empathy for Israeli suffering ostensibly given by a Palestinian leader. They found that among those who already trusted Palestinians, hearing these statements induced a variety of reconciliatory feelings, including more positive evaluations of Palestinians on a group evaluation scale, greater expectations that the conflict would improve, and increased empathy for the suffering of Palestinians. Other evidence finds that victim groups evaluate perpetrator groups more positively after the perpetrating government publicly and officially apologizes for the harm. Blatz, Ross, Day, and Schryer (manuscript in preparation) sampled Chinese Canadians before and after the Canadian government apologized and offered reparations for the Chinese Head Tax in 2006. On an intergroup evaluation scale, participants evaluated European Canadians more positively after the government apologized compared to before. In subsequent experiments, Blatz and colleagues replicated this finding using an adapted version of the Olympic doping scenario employed by Philpot and Hornsey (2008), Blatz et al. (manuscript in preparation).

Intergroup trust

Empirical evidence also suggests that apologies can restore trust in societal institutions, as de Grieff (2008) suggested. Katz et al. (2008) conducted a representative survey of African Americans, in which they asked people whether they knew about the Tuskegee Syphilis studies, whether they knew of President Clinton’s apology for these studies, and how much they trusted medical science research. African Americans who were aware of the apology trusted medical science research more than those aware of the studies but not the apology (Katz et al., 2008). Although this survey cannot rule out the alternative causal direction – that those who trust medical science are more likely to remember the apology – these data suggest the apology helped restore trust in a relevant societal institution.

Moderators of Intergroup Apology Effectiveness

So far, we have examined how intergroup apologies work and what effects they have. However, many researchers have examined the conditions under which intergroup apologies elicit greater or lesser effects. This literature contains many good hypotheses and important research results, but has not yet been integrated around common themes.
Below, we categorize the literature into four types of moderators: the details of the harm (Offence Characteristics), the context and content of the apology (Apology Characteristics), the relationship between the perpetrator and victim group (Intergroup Relationship Characteristics), and the relationship between individual members of the victim group (Intragroup Relationship Characteristics). We believe that this categorization generates ideas on other possible moderators of intergroup apology effectiveness. Throughout, we speculate on additional moderators that are yet to be examined empirically, but recognize that this list is far from exhaustive.

**Offence characteristics**

*Intentionality.* Whether or not the perpetrators intended to harm the victims may determine whether an intergroup apology is effective. Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, and Shirvani (2008) manipulated whether or not a perpetrator of an interpersonal transgression intended to hurt the victim and whether or not the perpetrator apologized for the harm. Victims only felt more forgiving after an apology when the perpetrator did not intend to harm. Struthers et al. found this occurred because perpetrators who intended their harm are viewed as undependable and their apologies are seen as disingenuous.

Although no study has directly compared apologies for intentional and unintentional intergroup harms, existing research suggests that Struthers et al.’s finding may apply to the intergroup domain. Recall that Brown et al. (2008) found that an apology offered by the United States government to Canada for the friendly fire deaths of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan elicited forgiveness, but Philpot and Hornsey (2008) found that apologies offered for intentional harms did not promote forgiveness. This discrepancy could be explained by the fact that the offense in the Brown et al. (2008) study was an unintended accident, whereas in the Philpot and Hornsey (2008) scenarios, the perpetrators intended their actions.

*Time since the harm.* The timing of intergroup apologies may also moderate their effectiveness. After an interpersonal transgression, apologies given later elicit greater forgiveness than apologies given earlier (Frantz & Bennigson, 2005) in part because victims can express their concerns and have their anger dissipate before the perpetrator apologizes. Similarly, in intergroup settings, some speculate that victim group members will not likely believe the perpetrators had an epiphany of remorse after a short amount of time if an apology is offered too soon (Blatz, Schumann, & Ross, 2009). We believe, however, that the relationship between timing and apology effectiveness is curvilinear: an apology offered too soon will be seen as insincere, but an apology offered too late may be perceived as a manipulative attempt to placate victims rather than as a genuine admission of remorse. Indeed, some media members speculate that intergroup apologies often fail because they are “too late” (e.g. Struck, 2001). It is interesting to note that in the Brown et al. (2008) study which found that intergroup apologies promoted forgiveness, the offenses occurred just a few days before the apology was offered, whereas in the Philpot and Hornsey (2008) studies which found that forgiveness was not forthcoming after an apology, the offenses occurred months and even years before the apology.

*Severity.* Many researchers have demonstrated that as severity of harm increases, victims of interpersonal transgressions are less likely to forgive the perpetrator after they apologize (Bennett & Earwaker, 1994; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004). However, others find that victims desire apologies more as harm severity
increases (Ohbuchi et al., 1989). It is apparent, then, that apologies are not seen to be inappropriate after severe harms, though they are less effective.

Nobody has yet examined how harm severity affects the impact of apologies offered between groups. From data collected amongst victims of the conflict in Northern Ireland, we know that victims are less willing to forgive the perpetrators of severe harms than those of less serious injustices (McLernon, Cairns, Hewstone, & Smith, 2004). In fact, perceived severity of harm was found to be the strongest negative predictor of forgiveness, exerting effects over and above that of the type of hurt (verbal abuse, physical abuse, or bereavement) or time since the incident. This research suggests that intergroup apologies for severe harms are less likely to work, but future research is needed to examine this issue empirically.

**Privity.** Legal scholars and psychologists use the word privity to refer to the link between the past harm and present suffering (Brooks, 1999; Starzyk & Ross, 2008). If privity is high, the present suffering of a group can be linked to the harm; when privity is low, the current group suffering is not linked to the harm. We propose that when privity exists, a symbolic gesture such as an apology may be unlikely to satisfy a victim group, especially if more substantial redress efforts are available and feasible. The victim group may question whether the perpetrator group is remorseful if they are unwilling to try to correct the ill effects caused by the harm. However, when privity does not exist, a symbolic gesture may suffice. Of course, it is also feasible that privity will not determine apology effectiveness. If material reparations are withheld because privity is absent, the victim group may perceive that they are being punished for their efforts to overcome their hardship. Clearly, future research should examine the role privity plays in intergroup apologies.

**Apology characteristics**

**Costliness.** Victim group members often criticize apologies as being too easy for the perpetrator group to offer. For example, Elwood Grey Buffalo stated in a public petition for an apology by the United States Government to its Native Peoples:

“I would like not only an apology for all Native Peoples, but a renewed system to try and make amends by treating Native People with respect & justice for past wrongs, lip service is too easy” (Petition to the US Government for an Apology to Native Americans, 2009).

Evidence suggests that costly apologies may be more effective than less costly apologies. Interpersonal apology research finds that apologies given at greater cost to the perpetrator are perceived by victims to be more sincere (Ohstubo & Watanabe, 2009). Political scientists similarly find that a key difference between successfully and unsuccessfully resolved conflicts is the ability of key players to give costly signals to opposing parties that their interest in peace is genuine. Importantly, costliness in this analysis was conveyed in both economic terms as well as in terms of suffering symbolic identity threats (Long & Brecke, 2003). Although this research focused on a broad array of reconciliation attempts in diverse settings, its findings are relevant to the potential effects of intergroup apologies.

One line of research that offers support for costliness as a potential moderator of apology effectiveness comes from Giner-Sorolla, Castano, Espinosa, and Brown (2008). These authors examined the effects of expressing guilt, shame, or no emotion at all as part of the apology speech act. Shame is described as a more abasing emotion than guilt as the source of the emotion represents a character trait, rather than a one-time misbehavior. In this way shame is symbolically more costly to the face and identity concerns of offenders,
as the behavior implicates the group’s character (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2008). Victims of an intergroup harm were more satisfied with the perpetrator group’s offer of apology and reparations when the apologizer expressed shame compared to when the apologizer expressed guilt or no emotion (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2008). The authors interpret these findings as evidence that abasement is important to apology successfulness. This could be because expressing abasing emotions is more costly than expressing other emotions or no emotion at all.

This research also highlights how costliness is represented by more than simply how expensive a redress effort is. In these studies, intergroup apologies and reparations accompanied by a statement of guilt or no emotion statement at all seemed insulting to the victims, but apologies and reparations accompanied by a statement of shame did not. The insult appeared to stem from the perception that the reparations were an insincere “buy-off.” Thus, even financially costly redress efforts can be ineffective, or even backfire, if the perpetrator does not appear to suffer symbolic and emotional cost as well.

**Time since the apology.** Many studies test the effects of intergroup apologies within short time frames of up to a week (e.g. Study 2, Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). But it may be that forgiveness takes time to develop, as many have theorized (McCullough, Fin cham, & Tang, 2003; Scobie & Scobie, 1998; Sells & Hargrave, 1998). To test this, Philpot and Hornsey (in press) asked Australian, Malaysian, and Filipino participants if they were aware of apologies offered by Japanese Prime Ministers for World War II harms. Participants also indicated how much they forgave Japan for these harms. The research showed that those who remembered apologies were significantly more forgiving than those who were unsure or thought no apology was given, suggesting that apologies for historical and intentional harms can elicit forgiveness after time passes. However, since few participants were aware of Japanese apologies (more participants stated that the Japanese had not apologized than that they had) this research also suggests that awareness of past apologies may need to be reinforced by continued conciliatory actions.

**Intergroup relationship characteristics**

**Trust.** Research on both interpersonal and intergroup apologies suggests that trust is a key precondition to apology effectiveness (Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). In the absence of trust, victims view an apology not as sincerely remorseful, but as an attempt to manipulate the victim. When trust is present, however, victims accept the perpetrator’s remorse as genuine. Research by Nadler and Liviatan (2006) demonstrates that intergroup trust affects victim group member’s responses to conciliatory statements given by leaders of perpetrator groups. In this study, Israeli participants read statements of empathy for the suffering of Israeli people ostensibly given by Palestinian leaders to their followers. These statements effectively promoted conciliatory responses only amongst participants who already trusted Palestinians. For participants lower in trust for Palestinians, the statements had no effect.

**Power.** The needs based model of reconciliation suggests that, after an offense has been committed, victims primarily suffer losses to their sense of control and power (Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2009). Yet as Nadler (2002) points out, relations between groups are often characterized by inequalities in power and status. Researchers have not yet considered how existing power differences and desires to be empowered after an injustice impact intergroup apology effects, but it seems probable that the power...
relationship between the apologizing group and harmed group moderates intergroup apology effectiveness. For example, low power groups may be less likely to accept apologies if they do not feel they have been respected in the redress process (Shnabel et al., 2009) whereas high power groups may be more likely to accept apologies in such a case because they are less concerned about being empowered. Alternatively, the reverse is also possible. Low power groups may accept apologies because they are unlikely to change the offer, whereas high power groups may reject an apology because they have the resources to elicit a more satisfactory future offer.

**Intragroup relationship characteristics**

**Identification.** How much an individual victim group member identifies with the victim group may also influence apology effectiveness. Those who consider a group important to their identity think, feel, and behave in ways that benefit and protect the ingroup more than those who do not consider that group important to their identity (Spears, Doosje & Ellemers, 1997). Accordingly, those who identify highly with a victim group should be suspicious of a perpetrator group’s intentions to atone for a past harm. Consistent with this, research by Brown et al. (2008) found that America’s apology for friendly fire killings elicited greater forgiveness for less identified Canadians compared to highly identified Canadians.

**A Comparison of Interpersonal and Intergroup Apologies**

When discussing this model of intergroup apologies, we have used the interpersonal apology literature to inform the discussion. However, these forms of apology occur in different domains and meet different needs. In this section, we outline the major differences between these apology types.

**Different linguistic structure**

Many have examined the linguistic structure of interpersonal apologies. Interpersonal apology researchers claim that expressing remorse is the primary purpose of an apology, but accepting responsibility (e.g. “I am to blame”) is also considered a defining feature (Allan, Allan, Kaminer, & Stein, 2006; Blum-Kulka & Ohlstein, 1984; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Takaku, 2000). Interpersonal apologizers will also occasionally admit wrongdoing (e.g. “My actions were wrong”), acknowledge the harm done (e.g. “I know how I hurt you”), promise forbearance (e.g. “It won’t happen again”), self-castigate (e.g. “I was stupid to do that”), and offer repair (e.g. “What can I do to fix it?”; Blatz et al., 2009; Blum-Kulka & Ohlstein, 1984; Lazare, 2004; McCullough, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991). For interpersonal apologies, these additional elements enhance forgiveness, but to a much smaller extent than expressing remorse (Scher & Darley, 1997). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, linguistic analyses find that the vast majority of interpersonal apologies contain little more than a statement of remorse (Meier, 1998).

Intergroup apologizers typically word their apologies much differently than interpersonal apologizers because they face a number of complications that interpersonal apologizers do not (Blatz et al., 2009; Tavuchis, 1991). Most obviously, intergroup apologies are typically offered for more severe harms. Also, apologies given on behalf of groups are usually public and historically significant acts; the victim group, the perpetrator group, and political opponents of the apologizer typically scrutinize the apology’s wording.
Furthermore, in some cases, representatives of the victimized group are asked to contribute to the wording of the apology to ensure that the victimized group has voice in the reconciliation process and to reduce the risk of the apology being rejected by leaders of the victimized group (Blatz et al., 2009). These complications contribute to the fact that apologies for historical harms are often more thorough than interpersonal apologies. For example, Blatz et al. (2009) examined thirteen recent government apologies for historical injustices for whether or not they contained each of six interpersonal apologies elements (Blum-Kulka & Ohlstein, 1984): eight contained all six elements, eleven contained all but one element, and all contained at least four of the six elements.

Intergroup apologies also contain statements not relevant to interpersonal apologies. First, the historical injustice being apologized for is often part of a multi-generational intergroup relationship, so apologies for historical injustices clearly delineate every act that is, and is not, being apologized for (Tavuchis, 1991). Further, because many people, particularly perpetrator group members (Sahdra & Ross, 2007), are not aware of the details of the injustice, political apologies describe the harms in vivid detail. Political apologies also occasionally praise the characters of the victimized group and the perpetrator group (Blatz et al., 2009), perhaps in an attempt to affirm each group’s social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These statements may make the apology acceptable to the victimized minority and offset any potential backlash amongst perpetrator group members (Brooks, 1999). Intergroup apologies may also include statements that protect people’s beliefs that they live in a just, fair, and legitimate world (Lerner, 1980; Kay et al., 2007). There is no evidence examining whether or not including any of the elements unique to intergroup apologies elicits greater forgiveness, improves intergroup attitudes, affirms social identities, or makes the current system appear more legitimate. However, it seems unlikely that adding these elements would be harmful.

**Different outcomes**

It is also unclear whether intergroup and interpersonal apologies function differently. In a relevant study by Philpot and Hornsey (2008; Study 4), a full apology was given to Australia either by an individual Japanese soldier or by a representative of all Japanese soldiers involved in committing World War II offences. Despite the fact that the exact same apology and relatively similar offences were implicated in each case, participants felt greater forgiveness for the individual Japanese soldier after his apology, but no greater forgiveness for Japanese soldiers as a collective after the representative’s apology. This study compared an individual’s apology to a group (a one-to-many apology) to a group’s apology to another group (a many-to-many apology). It remains to be seen if many-to-many apologies and one-to-one apologies evoke different outcomes.

**A Call for Future Research: Intergroup Apology Effects on the Perpetrator Group**

Most scholarship on intergroup apologies examines the victim group’s perspective. Although this focus is understandable, we believe that omitting the perpetrator group from past studies is a significant oversight that future research should correct. Understanding how the perpetrator group views the intergroup relationship after an apology may illuminate when and why these groups decide to apologize, inform political debates on whether to apologize, and delineate how an apology changes the perpetrator group’s view of the intergroup relationship.
For example, it is not clear how perpetrator group member’s attitudes toward the apology are affected by offering the apology. Perpetrator group members usually oppose apologies for historical injustice before they are offered (Blatz & Ross, 2009; Starzyk & Ross, 2008). Some cite this opposition as evidence that, if an apology were to be offered, perpetrator group members would openly protest the apology, and become resentful of the government and the victimized group (Brooks, 1999). Thus, an apology may not be worth the potential costs. However, there are reasons to predict that, once offered, an apology will garner greater support amongst perpetrator group members. According to System Justification Theory (Kay et al., 2007), people should support an apology that their government offers more than an apology their government refuses to offer because doing so makes the system appear to act in accordance with their preferences. Similarly, according to cognitive consistency theories, by increasing their favor for an apology their government has offered, perpetrator group members can maintain consistency between their usually positive evaluations of their country and the actions taken by their country (e.g. Heider, 1958).

These latter predictions are confirmed by opinion polling data collected in Canada and Australia before and after each country apologized for decades of abuse of Aboriginal children. In Australia, support for the apology went up 13% days after the apology was offered compared to two weeks before (Metherell, 2008). Similarly, in Canada, support rose 29% a few days after the apology compared to three months before (Support for Aboriginal Apology, 2008; El Akadd, 2008). Further evidence for this effect was observed by Blatz et al. (2010) who found that perpetrator group members randomly assigned to read that an apology had been offered for a historical harm evaluated that apology more positively compared to those randomly assigned to read that no apology had been offered.

These data make it clear that the perpetrator group’s responses to intergroup apologies are not self-evident. Furthermore, the perpetrator group’s reaction to the apology is likely to affect the victim group’s opinion of the apology, and, vice versa, the victim group’s reaction to the apology is likely to affect the perpetrator group’s opinion of the apology. However, these nuances are lost in research that fails to examine both the perpetrator and victim groups’ perspectives.

Summary and Conclusion

In light of the increasing rate of apologies being offered for historical injustices, many ask whether or not they “work.” As the model presented in this article makes clear, the answer depends on how one defines working and under what circumstances the apology is offered. When offered in the appropriate circumstance, an apology can aid in developing trust, more positive intergroup attitudes, and even forgiveness. Nevertheless, an apology will rarely be all that is necessary to correct past injustices and improve group relations. An apology should likely only be considered a small, but important part of a program of atonement for an intergroup harm.

Short Biographies

Craig W. Blatz’s research focuses on how individuals and governments create societies that are both just and peaceful. Currently he studies the effects of intergroup apologies and truth telling mechanisms on post-conflict reconciliation, multicultural policies on feelings of inclusion in society, and the determinants of collective action amongst members of minority groups. His work has been published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,
Craig is currently an Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department at Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton, Canada and was formerly an Assistant Professor in the Psychology of Peace and Violence Program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Craig received his BA from the University of Alberta and his PhD from the University of Waterloo.

Catherine Philpot conducts research that cuts across the domains of social, clinical, and peace psychology. One unifying theme is her interest in processes, both individual and group, that contribute to the development of peace after conflict. More specifically, her research has focused on the effect of apologies given between groups; the identification of factors that can predict forgiveness after intergroup conflict; and on factors that can promote psychological wellbeing for refugees and other individuals that have experienced intergroup conflict. Her work has been published in the European Journal of Social Psychology, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin as well as in books and book chapters. She currently holds a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia where she also teaches applied psychology. Catherine has a BBehSc from Latrobe University and a PhD from the University of Queensland.

Endnote

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References


