



# “Sorry for what we did”: A Social Psychological Understanding of Political and Intergroup Apologies (Introduction to the Special Issue)

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## ABSTRACT

Research on political apologies spans sociopolitical contexts and disciplines and methodological frameworks. In the rise of interest in political apologies, especially in light of ‘the age of apologies’, social psychologists strive to understand mechanisms of issuing, perception and evaluation of political apologies from many perspectives. This special issue aims to highlight the important role of social psychological theory in understanding political apologies and deepening knowledge in this field. The papers, which comprise the special issue, offer a detailed and comprehensive study of political apology, including both theoretical and methodological lens to enrich understanding of the topic. Concluding, all the papers of this special issue can be of interest in academics and researchers, as well as policy-makers and other stakeholders beyond academia.

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## INTRODUCTION

‘One of the most profound human interactions is the offering and accepting of apologies’, noted Lazare in his eye-opening analysis of the value and power of apology (2004: 1). Although he specifically made this observation when describing the role of apologies in our everyday interactions, it appears that groups and nations have taken his observations to heart. For example, in the past few decades, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of political apologies in the aftermath of historical, national, and political injustices and wrongdoings that have violated human rights in multiple ways. According to a recent database, more than 70 countries worldwide have expressed regret or remorse for past or recent human rights violations, particularly since the end of the Cold War (Zoodma & Schaafsma, 2021). This is a remarkable development, as it seems to represent a change in how countries deal with the dark chapters from their past. Rather than ignoring or denying the harm and suffering that they have inflicted within or beyond their borders, they now seem willing to publicly ‘face the past’ and make moral amends for historical wrongs (e.g., Howard-Hassmann & Gibney, 2008; Torpey, 2006). In the public debates and literature on this topic, it is often argued that such attempts to establish and recognize historical and political truths and make amends are essential because they may offer victims an acknowledgement of their human worth and dignity, but, more broadly, they may also help societies to progress and move forward (e.g., De Greiff, 2012; Govier & Verwoerd, 2002). The question is, do political apologies really have this potential?

The answer is not straightforward. For example, social psychological research has looked into the effects of political apologies on various outcome measures, such as people’s willingness to forgive, or their trust in the apology givers or the institutions that they represent (e.g., Kirchhoff & Čehajić-Clancy, 2014; Okimoto, Wenzel, & Hornsey, 2015; Philpot & Hornsey, 2011). These findings provide mixed support and suggest that they often fail to promote intergroup forgiveness and that people who are on the receiving end of an apology also tend to be skeptical about its sincerity (for an overview, see Hornsey, Wohl, & Philpot, 2015). This is perhaps not surprising. Why should people (and specifically those who have experienced a history of abuse and suffering) trust the words and promises from powerful states or their representatives? They may not only or necessarily have the needs and interests of the victim groups in mind when they apologize; they may offer the apology for political gains as well. Apologies are often also a careful balancing act, as there may be no consensus about the need to apologize in a country. This may especially be the case when the historical facts are contested or

controversial or when people reject the notion that current generations are or should take responsibility for human rights violations that were inflicted by previous generations. This may make politicians—even when they do apologize—reluctant to unequivocally acknowledge past wrongdoings and follow up on or go beyond such symbolic gestures, and it may also result in backlash once an apology has been offered.

At the same time, the call for apologies does not seem to have diminished, signaling a need for recognition among victim groups, for whom an apology may be a first and essential step in addressing the wrongs and injustices from the past. We hence need to obtain a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding political and group-based apologies to more accurately assess what role they may play in processes of healing and reconciliation. In this special issue on political and intergroup apologies for the *International Review of Social Psychology*, we present a collection of four empirical papers that aim to contribute to this and that also reflect a possible shift in our current thinking on apologies.

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PRESENT SPECIAL ISSUE

In the first paper in this special issue (‘To apologize or to compensate for colonial injustices?’), Martinovic and colleagues (2021) note that much of the research on apologies has focused on the perspectives of victims—whereas research on instrumental reparations has tended to focus on the perspectives of perpetrator group members. They point out that this one-sided approach is problematic, as we not only need to understand the needs of victim group members but also to know when and why perpetrator group members are willing to respond to such needs. The authors hence conducted a study to examine the attitudes of Dutch majority group members toward an apology by the Dutch government to colonial-origin (i.e., Suriname, Netherlands Antilles, and Indonesia) minority group members, which they also compared to their attitudes toward material reparations. The context and findings of this paper are intriguing and timely, especially in light of recent debates in several former colonial states about the need to make amends for the colonial past. In the case of the Netherlands, King Willem-Alexander expressed regret during a recent visit to Indonesia for the use of ‘excessive violence’ during its colonial rule, sparking debate about whether this was a necessary and meaningful step and whether the government should follow suit. Martinovic and colleagues focus on the perspectives of a community sample in this regard, essentially holding up a mirror to the recent debate around this topic while also examining how people’s attitudes toward symbolic and material

reparations are influenced by their positive or negative representations of the colonial past and by feelings of group-based guilt.

Van Assche and colleagues' (2021) contribution ('Sorry for Congo, let's make amends') also takes place in the context of a broader debate about how countries should deal with their colonial past. They conducted their study when Belgium had taken some initial steps toward what some may call redress for the atrocities that were committed under the rule of King Leopold II in the Congo (e.g., a letter by current King Philip expressing his 'deepest regrets' for the 'suffering' and 'humiliations' that were caused). As in the contribution by Martinovic and colleagues, they also focus on the attitudes of members of the perpetrator group (Flemish-speaking participants) toward an apology and reparations. They were, however, specifically interested in how individual differences in ideological worldviews (e.g., a more universal and inclusive or a more authoritarian orientation) and intergroup emotions such as guilt, anger, shame, and empathy affect people's attitudes to apologies and reparative measures for the atrocities in Congo and toward assistance and awareness measures. In a survey that they conducted among students, they found that people with more universal and inclusive worldviews are more likely to support an apology, reparations, and awareness-raising measures because they feel more empathy for the Congolese community. These results are very valuable, as they suggest that the focus on group-based guilt and shame in much of the current social psychological work on apologies is perhaps too narrow and that future research should also focus on other emotions.

In their contribution on 'Repairing trust between individuals and groups', Reinders Folmer and colleagues (2021) take a very different approach. They note that, although the remedial effects of interpersonal apologies are now well established, it is less clear whether intergroup apologies are equally effective in restoring trust. They make the case that the remedial potential of intergroup apologies may be much less as compared to interpersonal apologies because they are made by group leaders or representatives who were often not directly responsible for the harm inflicted. They also point out that people may be skeptical of the underlying motives of such apologies and that the emotional content that is conveyed in these statements may seem less credible in an intergroup context. Their experimental findings do indeed show that, whereas interpersonal apologies (and particularly those that included primary emotions) fully restored trust, apologies in intergroup interactions only did so partially, regardless of their emotional content. The findings of this paper add important insights to the current literature, highlighting that in the case of intergroup transgressions, more extensive remedies are needed than apologies to restore trust or reduce tensions.

Yet another approach is taken by Zoodsma and colleagues (2021) in 'These are not just words', in which they delve into the content of political apologies by drawing on more than 200 apology texts across 50 countries. Similar to Reinders Folmer and colleagues, the authors point out that political apologies are much more complex than those that are offered in the interpersonal realm and can also be seen as potentially face-threatening acts that have the potential to generate considerable controversy. They are hence less likely to meet all the requirements of apologies that are often seen as essential in addressing victims' needs (e.g., an explicit acknowledgement of the wrongdoing, an acceptance of responsibility, a recognition of victims' suffering). Zoodsma and colleagues systematically examine to what extent these various elements are present in apologies that have been offered by countries across the world. They find that there seems to be a 'baseline' template that countries use when offering apologies for past human rights violations. However, there is also important variation in how explicitly they address victims' needs, which can be linked to the receiving group (i.e., within country or not), the contentiousness of the apology in a country, and—albeit to a much lesser extent—the cultural context. The findings highlight that it is important to take the actual wording of political apologies into account when trying to understand their potential role in healing and reconciliation processes.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Reflecting on the content of the submissions of this collection, we note that the studies in this special issue are Euro-based, both in terms of the academic institutions where the researchers are based and—in three of the manuscripts—in terms of the samples under study. While these studies are a welcome addition to much of the current research that has focused on Australia and Canada (both settler colonial states), it should also be seen as a call for a more diverse makeup in the work on political apologies (Bentley, 2020; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). This is all the more important because political apologies have been offered across the globe, and it is not clear how representative much of the present research (which often relies on student samples as well) is and whether the findings can be generalized to the very diverse and complex historical, cultural, and political contexts in which apologies are demanded and received.

Nevertheless, the thematic and methodological diversity of the papers in this special issue provides insightful directions for further research. For example, future studies may want to take the findings a step further and look at when, how, and why political apologies are seen as important by actual victim group

and perpetrator group members or people from the general public, how they evaluate actual apologies that have been offered, and what may explain any differences in this regard. A more diverse methodological approach, such as qualitative research and field experiments, should be part of this practice. The findings from this special issue also suggest that, in future research on political or group-based apologies, it is important to include multiple perspectives and representations (also of the past) and to move beyond solely the role of moral emotions, such as shame and guilt. In addition, they suggest that it is important to pay attention to the specific content of political apologies and the actors involved and not to limit the analyses to this specific form of redress only.

We hope that this special issue opens up the floor for further discussions on the value and meaning of political apologies, which we think should not only take place within social psychology but also across different disciplines and with stakeholders and practitioners (for a methodological combination in the study of political apologies, see Gkinopoulos, 2021). Incorporating multiple perspectives that integrate multi-method approaches may stimulate a deeper understanding of how political apologies impact individuals and groups and whether they have a role to play in processes of reconciliation and redress within and between groups.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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