CrossMark

Perpetrator groups can enhance their moral self-image by accepting their own intergroup apologies☆

Fiona Kate Barlow [a],*, Michael Thai [b], Michael J.A. Wohl [c], Sarah White [b],
Marie-Ann Wright [b], Matthew J. Hornsey [b]

[a] School of Applied Psychology and Menzies Health Institute Queensland, Griffith University, Australia
[b] School of Psychology, University of Queensland, Australia
[c] Department of Psychology, Carleton University, Canada

HIGHLIGHTS

- Perpetrators are sensitive to other perpetrators' reactions to collective apologies.
- Perpetrators can meet their own moral needs in the absence of victim pardon.
- Perpetrator, as well as victim acceptance can restore perpetrators' moral image.
- Victim group members who reject substandard, qualified apologies are still disliked.
- Any rejected apology reduces perpetrator group members' willingness to reconcile.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

There is an implicit assumption that perpetrators' moral image restoration following an intergroup apology depends on absolution from victims. In this paper we examine whether perpetrators can in fact look to other ingroup members for moral pardon. In Studies 1 and 4, Australians read an apology to Indian people for a series of assaults on Indian nationals in Australia. In Studies 2 and 3, non-Aboriginal Australians were provided with apologies offered on their behalf to Aboriginal Australians. In each study participants were told that other perpetrator group members had either accepted or rejected the apology. In line with predictions, when perpetrator group members heard that fellow perpetrators accepted an apology made to victims they felt morally restored, and consequently were more willing to reconcile. Effects were largely unqualified by apology quality (Studies 2–4), and held in the face of victim group apology rejection (Studies 3–4). We demonstrate that perpetrator group members can effectively gain moral redemption by accepting their own apologies, even qualified ones that have proved insufficient to victim groups.

Crown Copyright © 2015 Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Broadly, an apology is a communication in which an acknowledgement of responsibility and an expression of remorse are offered by an offending party to an offended party (Scher & Darley, 1997; Tavuchis, 1991). Although much of the empirical work on apologies has been at the interpersonal level (see Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004), a growing body of literature is now accumulating on the antecedents and consequences of collective apologies. Most of this work has focused on how collective apologies impact the victim group (see Hornsey & Wohl, 2013, for a review). We suggest, however, that apologies are also crafted for an internal audience: other perpetrator group members. As such, it is important to understand how the responses of perpetrator group members to apologies offered on their behalf impact on their sense of themselves as a moral group, and consequently, their willingness to reconcile. This paper presents the first answers to these questions.

1. The needs-based model of reconciliation

Following a group-based transgression, histories remain fiercely contested, and members of perpetrator groups often resent, rather than welcome, efforts at reconciliation made on their behalf (Luke,

1997). Thus, knowing what drives perpetrator group members toward reconciliation is important, especially since they often hold (sometimes as a direct result of the historical transgression) the power, status, and financial sway to promote or prevent reconciliation efforts.

In order to understand *intergroup* reconciliation processes researchers have drawn on what we know about *interpersonal* transgression and reconciliation. Shnabel and Nadler's (2008) *needs-based model of reconciliation* is one example from the interpersonal domain that has been successfully applied to the intergroup context. From this perspective, victims and perpetrators have different needs following an intergroup transgression. When people have been victimized they typically feel as if power, control, honor, and status have been stripped from them (Herman, 1992; Scheff, 1994). Perpetrators, on the other hand, are those who have *taken* power from the victim. Consequentially they often report feeling guilt (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Leach, Iyer, & Pedersen, 2006), shame (Brown & Čehajić, 2008; Brown, González, Zagefka, Manzi, & Čehajić, 2008), and anxiety about their moral status as a group (Brown & Čehajić, 2008; Exline & Baumeister, 2000; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Tavuchis, 1991; for an overview of moral emotions see Giner-Sorolla, 2013).

With victim and perpetrator both suffering, Shnabel and Nadler (2008) see reconciliation as a social exchange through which both parties can have their needs met. For victims this is power, and for perpetrators, morality. Thus, Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, and Carmi (2009) propose that the primary goal of perpetrator groups in the process of reconciliation is to restore their public moral image, and it is the satisfaction of this need that promotes support for reconciliation efforts. Victim groups therefore hold power over the perpetrator group, as it is their acceptance that can cancel perpetrators' moral debt.

2. An alternative path to perpetrator moral redemption

But victim group members are not the only source of validation and social acceptance for perpetrators. In an collective transgressions there are multiple social actors in both victim and perpetrator groups. This means that messages about acceptance and empowerment can come from the outgroup (as in Shnabel et al., 2009) *or* the ingroup. It is therefore theoretically possible that a perpetrator group could extend moral redemption to itself by accepting its own apology.

It is often the case that the perpetrator group is a majority group, both in a numerical and a sociostructural sense. Thus, perpetrator group members may have limited contact with victim group members (e.g., see Barlow, Louis, & Hewstone, 2009), and therefore limited access to their responses to gestures of reconciliation. Additionally, victim groups are often afforded little voice, or do not make their responses to gestures of reconciliation public. On the other hand, during the reconciliation process perpetrator group members are likely to meet frequently, discussing, debating and responding to gestures of reconciliation made on their behalf (Luke, 1997). In this way, perpetrators may feel able to decide for themselves if moral redemption is warranted, given existing reconciliation efforts.

As detailed above, the needs-based model of reconciliation states that the way in which messages of social acceptance work to increase perpetrator group members' willingness to reconcile is through moral image restoration (although at the intergroup level this full path has never been tested). In this spirit, we suggest that perpetrator group members may be able to offer a message of acceptance to one another, feel morally restored as a result, and consequently be more willing to reconcile — all without reference to the victim group with whom they are hoping to reunite.

3. Overview of studies

We test this proposal in four studies. Study 1 tests whether or not perpetrator group members feel morally restored and are consequently

more willing to reconcile with the victim group if an intergroup apology offered to the victim group is accepted (relative to rejected) by fellow perpetrator group members. In Studies 2–4 we introduce apology quality as a potential moderator of the effect, examining whether it matters if perpetrator group members are rejecting or accepting qualified or unqualified apologies. In Studies 3–4 we also manipulate victim group apology acceptance or rejection, to test the robustness of our effects. Finally, in Study 4 we elucidate on *why* participants think that perpetrators (as compared to victims) might reject a perpetrator-led apology. In doing so, we make the case that needs for moral rehabilitation can be partly met internally, such that perpetrator groups can offer an apology (unqualified *or* qualified), accept it themselves (even if it is rejected by victim group members), and consequently restore their own moral image (at least in their own eyes).

These studies make several contributions to the literature. First, although there is a burgeoning literature on the effects of intergroup apologies, it typically examines the effects of apologies on victim groups. Although this is obviously important, it is also true that the success of reconciliation attempts in part rests on the messages and resources offered by perpetrator groups. Accordingly, understanding the effects of apologies on perpetrator groups is of fundamental importance (Zaiser & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). Second, the current studies shed light on the needs-based model of reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), and the potential ways that perpetrator groups can fulfill these needs without the endorsement of victim groups. Finally, Studies 2–4 manipulate the quality of an intergroup apology to examine its downstream consequences. Although previous studies have examined aspects of the content of apologies (e.g., the emotional terms used: see Giner-Sorolla, Castano, Espinosa, & Brown, 2008; Wohl, Hornsey, & Bennett, 2012), few have done so in a way that implies that one is of higher quality than the other (for an exception see Zaiser & Giner-Sorolla, 2013). Further, although the notion of qualified versus unqualified apologies has received attention in the literature on interpersonal transgressions (e.g., Benoit & Drew, 1997; Hupka, Jung, & Silverthorn, 1987; Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994; Risen & Gilovich, 2007), this is the first set of studies to examine its effects in the unique psychological domain of intergroup transgressions.

3.1. Study 1

In Study 1, non-Indian Australians (perpetrator group members) read about a real life intergroup transgression: the murder of an Indian student by an Australian teen. Note that this incident was described as explicitly intergroup, as there was speculation that the murder was racially motivated, and it occurred amid a huge increase in the frequency of attacks on Indians in Australia. Participants read an Australian Governmental apology to India (created for the purposes of this study), and were then given information about what percentage of fellow non-Indian Australians accepted or rejected the apology. Finally, participants' moral image and willingness to reconcile were measured. We proposed that participants who read that the apology was accepted by fellow perpetrator group members would feel more morally restored than when they read that it was rejected, and would consequently indicate a greater willingness to reconcile with Indian people.

3.1.1. Method

3.1.1.1. Participants and design. Two hundred and one non-Indian Australian participants (107 women, 1 missing gender information) were recruited through an online data collection company ($M_{age} =$ 46.65). Participants were randomly allocated to the conditions of a one-way between-groups design with two levels (perpetrator response: acceptance vs. rejection). Of the participants who completed the survey, 58 failed the manipulation check (detailed below), leaving