



Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel

When the past haunts the present: Intergroup forgiveness and historical closure in post World War II societies in Asia and in Europe[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 February 2012

Received in revised form 24 May 2012

Accepted 29 May 2012

Keywords:

Intergroup forgiveness

World War II

Guilt

Closure

Socio-historical context

Social representations of history

ABSTRACT

The study investigates intergroup forgiveness and its antecedents in the context of post World War II in Asia and Europe. An integrative social psychological and social representation of history and identity theoretical framework was used in which it is proposed that the societal context influences intergroup forgiveness of formerly victimized societies. Data was collected from 1197 university students from mainland China, Taiwan, the Philippines, France, Russia and Poland. ANOVAs show significant differences across societies. Mainland Chinese participants were less forgiving than all other participants. We examined two new variables contributing to explain variations in intergroup forgiveness: historical closure and perceived costs of granting forgiveness. Multiple hierarchical regressions and cross-level operator analyses showed that historical and political contexts are significant contributors in the intergroup forgiveness process. The importance of accounting for and the necessity to extend the scope of research regarding the political and historical context in which formerly victimized societies are embedded is highlighted.

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1. Introduction

Compared to progress made in interpersonal forgiveness research, there is relatively little known about the process of forgiveness between groups or nations suffering from past conflicts – either at the symbolic or physical level (Roe, 2007). Most of the research conducted on intergroup forgiveness focuses on the application of variables embedded within social psychological theory using a social identity theory (SIT) paradigm (e.g. social identity, collective guilt and shame, intergroup contact, group-based emotions) in a single society (e.g. Čehajić, Brown, & Castano, 2008; Manzi & González, 2007; McLernon, Cairns, Hewstone, & Smith, 2004; Noor, Brown, & Prentice, 2008; Tam et al., 2007). In general, research applying the SIT paradigm has found strong evidence that post-conflict intergroup forgiveness is influenced by identity

[☆] Katja Hanke received Honourable Mention for the Rae and Dan Landis Outstanding Dissertation Award (2011). This invited paper formed part of her doctoral thesis.

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processes and contact, and is supported by the development of positive attitudes. Although Worthington (2005) has pointed out that interpretations of events probably influence the process of forgiveness, previous research has not taken the historical context and the consequences of different historical accounts into consideration.

Context is usually defined as “the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood” (Oxford Online Dictionary). “In context” refers to “considered together with the surrounding (. . .) circumstances” whereas “out of context” refers to “without the surrounding (. . .) circumstances and so not fully understandable” (Oxford Online Dictionary). Therefore, we define the historical and political context as a set of factual information that surrounds an historical event or situation with significance, such as World War II (WW II) globally and the 1937 Nanjing Massacre regionally. Without acknowledging the circumstances and facts about an historical event and using it for further interpretation, research output cannot be easily understood, since it is “out of context”. Therefore, we aim for an “in context” approach. While historical and political contexts are acknowledged in previous research, they are neither used comprehensively as a source for further predictions nor for thorough interpretations of the results. Thus, previous research can be classified as “out of context”. Furthermore, little is known about how forgiveness processes work *between* nations rather than *within* a nation or a region.

The current research aims to integrate the functioning of social psychological theory on intergroup forgiveness into the historical and political context of post WW II relations between Germany, Japan, and their neighbors respectively focusing on formerly victimized societies. It makes use of the social context provided by the collective remembering of historical conflict (Pennebaker, Páez, & Rimé, 1997) to make specific predictions about prospects for intergroup forgiveness in the two theatres of Asia and Europe. Thus, this research fills in an important gap: acknowledging the historical context and its contribution for explanations and investigating between-society differences in forgiveness.

In this research we are focusing on a set of new and established social psychological predictors of intergroup forgiveness. More specifically, we investigate the predictive power of the new concepts of historical closure and perceived costs of granting forgiveness which contributions will be contrasted to established predictors, such as collective guilt assignment and group-based anger as well as outgroup trust. These constructs and their inter-relationships will be further elaborated on in the followings sections. Moreover, we are taking it a step further and examine the impact of socio-historical context variables, such as the number of public apologies during the last two decades, on intergroup forgiveness while controlling for the impact of the social psychological variables.

We sampled university students from two post WW II contexts that included six formerly victimized societies ($N = 1197$), three from (a) Europe (France, Poland, and Russia) and (b) three from Asia (mainland China, the Philippines, and Taiwan). Inter alia, this study also investigates psychological correlates (collective guilt assignment, group-based anger, outgroup trust, and new variables historical closure and perceived costs of granting forgiveness) of intergroup forgiveness across these six societies. We also focus on the differences between these 6 societies and how these differences can be explained. We consider the post WW II context as a very meaningful natural laboratory, for Germany and Japan have adopted different strategies over the course of the past half-century for handling their WW II past. This should have definite consequences in terms of their neighbors' willingness to forgive them for past misdeeds.

1.1. Intergroup forgiveness

According to Hanke (2009) intergroup forgiveness can be described as a dynamic process between the victimized and perpetrating party that involves negotiation and understanding. It is an unfolding and continuous process, in which the perpetrator party provides reasons for the victimized party to consider forgiveness and reconciliation. Importantly, it involves psychological closure for both parties (e.g. a form of ‘social healing’), in which a symbolic departure from the past is reached. A shared and consensual interpretation of the conflict between both parties is necessary in order for them to be able to empathize and gain trust with the other side. The process entails acknowledgment of harm done and a public apology that includes significant and coherent actions, and an acceptance by the victimized party that the approach by the perpetrator party is appropriate and genuine, leading to an open dialogue. This dialogue may include sharing historical understandings of the conflict. According to research on the collective remembering of conflict (Páez & Liu, 2011; Pennebaker et al., 1997), divergent versus consensual interpretations of the past between formerly conflicting nations is crucial in understanding why societies today are either reluctant or eager to engage in peacemaking efforts to resolve outstanding disputes.

1.2. The past is not past: cultural contexts provided by the collective remembering of WW II

The antecedents and consequences of WW II have become an important part of German history and how German identity is narrated today (Buruma, 1994; Hauss, 2003; Oliner, 2008). Germany's past war crimes (especially the Holocaust) are symbols of extreme atrocities and frequently used as a reference point when other crimes against humanity are committed. However, it is generally accepted by Germany's neighbors, especially in Western Europe, that Germany has expressed genuine contrition for her war crimes, and moreover that the Germany of today has broken with any sense of political continuity with Hitler's Germany (Hein & Selden, 2000). Atrocities committed during WW II and the Sino-Japanese War in East-Asia by Japan are less familiar to Westerners (see Hein & Selden, 2000), but are salient and have an unresolved legacy. That is, Japan's neighbors are less confident of Japan's genuine contrition for her misdeeds in WW II and less confident that

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