



## Collective apology, hope, and forgiveness<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

A notion of hope is adopted to analyse the effects of collective apologies on forgiveness. While apologies invoke the *possibility* of a more harmonious relationship, victims need to actually *desire* a reconciled future in order to seize the possibility. Hope results from the combination of possibility and desirability and, in turn, promotes forgiveness. Three online studies referring to international incidents were conducted. Studies 1 and 2 referred to Indonesia's execution of two Australians found guilty of drug smuggling, an act considered an affront by many Australians. Study 3 referred to a (fabricated) incident of desecration of Australian war graves in the Philippines. In all three studies, an alleged apology from the offending country led to greater perceived possibility of reconciliation outcomes; possibility was positively related to hope particularly when the Australian participants regarded the reconciliation outcomes as desirable (measured in Study 1, manipulated in Studies 2 and 3); hope was positively related to forgiveness. The analysis in terms of hope illuminates limiting and enabling conditions of the conciliatory effects of collective apologies.

### 1. Introduction

Collective apologies have become exponentially more frequent in recent time (Brooks, 1999). Paradoxically, this means they have become more expected and desired following a wrongdoing but at the same time less satisfying (Okimoto, Hornsey, & Wenzel, 2015). Indeed, a cynical observer may be inclined to regard collective apologies as political stunts or empty gestures. However, we argue that apologies are commonly demanded or offered because of the promise they hold, namely that they might help parties to deal with their fractured past and restore their relationship. Take the example of the Australian government's 2008 apology to the Stolen Generation (Indigenous children forcefully removed from their families over decades). In its coverage of the apology the Sydney Morning Herald wrote the following day that “many *hope* [the apology] will usher in a new era in Aboriginal reconciliation” (Gartrell, 2008; emphasis added). In the present research we argue that apologies can indeed instil *hope*, to the extent that recipients desire reconciliation and, thus, seize the promise of the apology and invest it with hope. In turn, hope may motivate conciliatory responses, including forgiveness.

#### 1.1. Collective apologies

Apologies are, at a minimum, a communication or gesture by

offenders through which they take responsibility for having committed a wrong and signal remorse for their actions (Lazare, 2004); more elaborate apologies may further acknowledge the harm done, offer repair, and/or promise to change (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Steele & Blatz, 2014). In the case of collective apologies this is done by a *group* (or by individual members on its behalf) for a wrong that the group (or some of its members) committed against another group (Smith, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991). Apologies have been described as powerful devices that can reduce victims' desire for vengeance, increase their willingness to engage with the offenders and reconcile, as well as increase their willingness to forgive (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; see Lazare, 2004). However, the power of apologies is certainly not unqualified. In interpersonal contexts positive effects have been found to depend on factors such as intentionality of the wrongdoing, perceived sincerity of the apology and its timing, as well as the closeness of the relationship (e.g., Allan, Allan, Kaminer, & Stein, 2006; Frantz & Bennis, 2005; Schumann, 2012; Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008).

In intergroup contexts the evidence specifically for the forgiveness-promoting effect of apologies has been particularly mixed (Hornsey & Wohl, 2013, for a review). Philpot and Hornsey (2008) established the problem clearly when they reported four studies in various contexts that found no evidence that collective apologies

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**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and correlations (Study 1).

	No apology	Official apology	Grassroots apology	Correlations		
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	1.	2.	3.
1. Desirability	5.09 (1.15)	5.21 (0.96)	5.19 (1.24)	–		
2. Possibility	4.08 (0.97)	4.76 (1.06)	3.93 (1.25)	0.28*	–	
3. Hope	4.75 (1.18)	5.06 (1.21)	4.87 (1.52)	0.41***	0.51***	–
4. Forgiveness	3.97 (1.54)	4.74 (1.57)	4.34 (1.53)	0.13	0.34**	0.41***

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

promoted intergroup forgiveness, despite creating what were meant to be conducive conditions (e.g., a primary victim advocating forgiveness). While some studies found that collective apologies *can* increase forgiveness (Brown, Wohl, & Exline, 2008; Leonard, Mackie, & Smith, 2011), other research, including qualitative studies in the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Chapman, 2007) and the Australian government's apology to the Stolen Generation (Philpot, Balvin, Mellor, & Bretherton, 2013), confirms the bleaker view. As Hornsey and Wohl (2013) concluded, a collective apology “alone, standing in isolation, is rarely enough to promote intergroup forgiveness” (p. 23).

Research has shed some light on distinctive features of intergroup contexts that might limit the effectiveness of collective apologies (for a theoretical discussion see also Wohl, Hornsey, & Philpot, 2011). Brown et al. (2008, Study 1), for example, found that those more strongly identified with their ingroup showed less forgiveness in response to an apology, which may be due to loyalty to one's victimized ingroup or lack of empathy with the offender outgroup. Wohl, Hornsey, and Bennett (2012) produced supportive evidence for their view that the implied intergroup differentiation promotes an infra-humanization of the outgroup, questioning their capacity to experience complex, secondary emotions (including guilt, shame, or remorse), thus leading the victimized ingroup to regard an apology as less sincere. Given that an apology is commonly expressed or advocated by individual members, perceived sincerity can also be diminished when an apology is not seen to be representative of the offender group, when it is not a decision carried by the majority or does not reflect the sentiment of the wider group (Wenzel, Okimoto, Hornsey, Lawrence-Wood, & Coughlin, 2017). In either case perceived lack of sincerity of the apology makes victim groups less likely to respond with forgiveness. As Hornsey and Wohl (2013) argue, these issues boil down to a problem of trust.

### 1.2. Hope in reconciliation

Recent research, however, has argued that another crucial factor for intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation is *hope* (e.g., Cohen-Chen, Crisp, & Halperin, 2015). Whereas trust can be understood as an attribution of sincerity and benevolence to the outgroup and, thus, one's preparedness to expose vulnerabilities to them (Kramer & Carnevale, 2001), hope is a positive anticipatory belief in the realization of particular outcomes (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010). Hope has been shown to have motivational force that can fuel and sustain efforts toward social change (Greenaway, Cichocka, Veelen, Likki, & Branscombe, 2016). Hope in relationship repair, we argue, could similarly fuel one's commitment to reconciliation, and the motivation to make it happen through proactive and prosocial measures such as forgiveness.

As with trust, the nature of intergroup contexts (compared to interpersonal) may mean that anticipatory beliefs or expectations that

the parties will reconcile can be rather low. Intergroup conflicts may appear more intractable, with group members defining their identity as distinct from the other, or even defining their social identity in terms of the intergroup conflict (Bar-Tal, 2007). Groups' attitudes to each other tend to be influenced by socially shared stereotypes and prejudices and may be difficult to shift due to an essentialist view of the groups (see Prentice & Miller, 2007). This may instill the perception that the groups are unlikely to reconcile. Only to the degree that the groups are seen to be malleable, able to develop and change, are victim group members likely to credit an apology with offering forgiveness to the outgroup (Wohl et al., 2015). Likewise, the idea that conflicts are malleable and can change has been found to increase support for concessions and, importantly, these effects were mediated by increased hope for an end of the conflict (Cohen-Chen, Halperin, Crisp, & Gross, 2014).

However, the fascinating aspect of hope is that it does not rely on a high likelihood that the outcomes materialize; this makes hope different from other expectation-based concepts such as optimism or efficacy, as we will discuss now. The complex psychology of hope will let us view the function and (in)effectiveness of apologies in a new light.

### 1.3. Hope: investment in possibility

Hope can be understood as emotional and attitudinal positivity in the face of uncertainty of a desired outcome. This is consistent with most views on hope that ascribe it an affective and motivational quality (e.g., Bruininks & Malle, 2005; Lazarus, 1999); however, what distinguishes these various views are the appraisals implicated in hope. Many hope researchers argue that the positivity derives from the reduction of uncertainty, for example, through an increased confidence that the outcome is probable (Stotland, 1969) or, more specifically, the perception of pathways and individual agency in achieving the desired outcome (Snyder, 2002). However, this view tends to conflate hope with expectation-based constructs such as self-efficacy, optimism, and control beliefs (Aspinwall & Leaf, 2002). Instead, hope comes into play when the desired outcome is less than probable (Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990), and rather merely possible (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010; Nelissen, 2015). Without possibility there is no basis for hope; there would be hopelessness instead. But where there is a possibility, hope amounts to investing this possibility with positive affect (in a glass-is-half-full manner) and positive motivation, acting on this possibility “as if” there is a good chance of obtaining the desired outcome (Pettit, 2004). Acting “as if” does not imply greater confidence than is warranted; rather hope maintains the positive assessment that the outcome is still possible (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010), which allows one to make the most of the low odds (Pettit, 2004).

Thus, hope is investment in emerging possibility. The driver of this investment is the *perceived desirability* of the outcome (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010). In fact, more than just desirability in terms of a detached valuation (“wouldn't it be nice?”), it is the significance of the outcome for the hoper's existence and/or identity that drives the investment (Bury, Wenzel, & Woodyatt, 2016). When the outcome is critical to one's survival, one's values, or who one is or wants to become, a failure to invest the possibility with hope might amount to a loss or betrayal of those values and identities. Consistent with this, Bury et al. found that, while optimism increases linearly with perceived likelihood of the outcome irrespective of its perceived desirability, hope has a curvilinear relationship to likelihood with a jump in hope at levels of emerging possibility, but only when the outcome is highly desirable and personally significant. This latching onto possibility is the characteristic feature of hope.

Therefore, people turn to hope in situations of uncertainty, when prospects are less than probable, but merely possible (Bury et al., 2016; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010). Hope may thus become a prime candidate for driving or unlocking efforts to resolve intergroup conflicts, given the many challenges these pose for reconciliation. Importantly, hope for reconciliation and peace can partly be elicited by communica-

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