



## Government Apologies for Historical Injustices

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*Scholars from various disciplines suggest that government apologies for historical injustices fulfill important psychological goals. After reviewing psychological literature that contributes to this discussion, we present a list of elements that political apologies should contain to be acceptable to both members of the victimized minority and the nonvictimized majority. Content coding of a list of government apologies revealed that many, but not all, include most of these elements. We then reviewed research demonstrating that political apologies that contain most of these facets are favorably evaluated, but especially by members of the nonvictimized majority. Next, we examined how the demands of victimized minorities affect their satisfaction with government apologies that lack some components. We conclude by discussing the implications of our analysis for when and how governments should apologize.*

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**KEY WORDS:** Apology, Government Apology, Reparations, Historical Injustice, Reactive Devaluation

Throughout history, governments of many countries have committed deliberate discriminatory acts against minorities, ranging from unfair taxes to slavery and mass murder. These government actions were often legal, approved by legislatures and courts as well as the majority of citizens. In retrospect, these actions seem unjust, but what, if anything, should current governments do about them? Sometimes governments respond to charges of historical injustice by downplaying the magnitude of the harm or even denying that the events occurred. For example, despite frequent requests that it acknowledge and apologize for the Armenian

genocide of 1915, the Turkish government denies that the episode ever occurred (“Armenian Genocide,” 2006; Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006). Sometimes governments acknowledge the earlier injustice, but argue that it is too late, too difficult, or too expensive to do anything about it. Such arguments are used to justify the U.S. federal government’s refusal to apologize and pay compensation for slavery<sup>1</sup> (Brooks, 1999). Sometimes governments maintain that their countries have already done much to alleviate historical injustices, and they need to focus on current problems (Brooks, 1999). Sometimes governments establish inquiries dedicated to detailing and explaining earlier injustices, for example, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Finally, with increasing frequency in recent decades, governments sometimes apologize for historical injustices (Lazare, 2004). These apologies may or may not include offers of financial compensation (Wohl et al., 2006).

Does it matter how governments respond to historical injustices that occurred decades or even centuries ago? Their response seems to matter a great deal to some previously victimized groups. Around the world, groups are demanding that governments acknowledge and apologize for historical injustices (Brooks, 1999; Minow 2002). In this article, we discuss the psychology of government apologies. Many authors argue that apologies are an especially potent means of resolving conflicts and repairing damaged relationships between individuals, groups, and nations (Lazare, 2004; Minow, 2002; Tavuchis, 1991). Most psychological research on apologies has focused on the content and impact of interpersonal apologies, in which a single transgressor apologizes to another person for recent harms (e.g., Scher & Darley, 1997). In laboratory studies, researchers typically present participants with descriptions of hypothetical transgressions and vary whether or not (and sometimes how) the transgressor apologizes. Participants are asked to infer how a victim might react to the transgressor. Participants infer greater forgiveness and improved evaluations of the transgressor following an apology (e.g., Scher & Darley, 1997). In related research, linguists and psycholinguists examine the content of apologies (Bavelas, 2004; Meier, 1998). These researchers do not tend to study how the wording of apologies predicts reconciliation or forgiveness.

Although many authors insist that government apologies for historical injustices are often beneficial (Barkan, 2000; Brooks, 1999; Minow, 2002), there has been relatively little research on the content or impact of such apologies. Indeed, until recent decades, there were perhaps too few government apologies to permit serious scrutiny (Lazare, 2004). In the current article, we first examine how governments might apologize. Based on psychological theorizing, linguistic analyses of interpersonal apologies, and a consideration of government objectives, we derive 10 potentially important elements for a government apology. We then

<sup>1</sup> Virginia recently became the first state to officially offer an expression of regret for its role in slavery (“Virginia Expresses ‘Profound Regret’,” 2007).

examine the degree to which a set of government apologies includes these elements. After describing how governments apologize, we then examine when and why government apologies for historical injustices might or might not be effective. Again, there is relatively little existing research, but we describe some recent studies we and others have conducted on this topic.

### The Contents of Apologies

Broadly defined, an apology is a speech act designed to promote reconciliation between two or more parties (Tavuchis, 1991). Research on interpersonal apologies suggests that a comprehensive apology could potentially contain as many as six complementary but distinguishable elements (Lazare, 2004; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schlenker & Darby, 1981; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Forster, & Montada, 2004; Tavuchis, 1991). These elements include: (1) remorse (e.g., "I'm sorry"), (2) acceptance of responsibility (e.g., "It's my fault"), (3) admission of injustice or wrong doing (e.g., "What I did was wrong"), (4) acknowledgement of harm and/or victim suffering (e.g., "I know you are upset"), (5) forbearance, or promises to behave better in the future (e.g., "I will never do it again"), and (6) offers of repair (e.g., "I will pay for the damages").

Although such theoretical analyses of the content of apologies are intuitively plausible, people do not tend to provide such comprehensive apologies. In observing interpersonal apologies in everyday life, linguists report that the vast majority consist of simple expressions of remorse such as "I'm sorry," and very few apologies are more comprehensive (Meier, 1998). In laboratory studies of hypothetical transgressions, participants infer that the presence or absence of a simple expression of remorse (e.g., "I'm sorry") has a large effect on reactions to a transgressor. Although participants infer that more complex apologies are more effective than simple apologies, this effect is much less dramatic by comparison (Scher & Darley, 1997).

A government apology for a historical injustice is likely to be more comprehensive than a typical interpersonal apology. A government apology represents a formal attempt to redress a severe and long-standing harm against an innocent group. Because these harms are more severe than most interpersonal transgressions, a simple "sorry" is unlikely to suffice. Also, a government apology is public and aimed at present and future audiences that include members of the nonvictimized majority, as well as the previously victimized group. As some of these audiences may know little about the injustice, "everything counting as the apology must be spelled out; nothing can be taken for granted or remain ambiguous" (Tavuchis, 1991, p. 71).

Each of the elements of an interpersonal apology is likely to serve important psychological needs when included in government apologies for historical injustices. An expression of remorse indicates that a government believes that an apology is warranted and cares about the victims. By assigning responsibility for

the injustice outside the victim group, a government explicitly asserts the innocence of the victims. An apology that assigns responsibility can therefore help offset a common tendency to blame victims for their own troubles (Lerner, 1980). An admission of injustice further absolves the victims of blame. It assures the victimized group that the current government upholds the moral principles that were violated (Lazare, 2004) and is committed to upholding a legitimate and just social system (Jost & Banaji, 1994). By acknowledging harm and victim suffering, a government validates the victims' pain and corroborates their suffering for outsiders (Lazare, 2004). A promise of forbearance can work to restore trust between groups; it indicates that the government values the victims and their group and is willing to work to keep them safe (Lazare, 2004). Finally, by offering repair (e.g., financial compensation to victims or their families), governments demonstrate that their apology is sincere (Minow, 2002)—colloquially, they are willing to put their money where their mouth is. If an apology serves all of these psychological needs, it should theoretically make the victims and other members of their group feel better about themselves, the majority group, their government, and their country (Lazare, 2004; Nadler & Saguy, 2004).

Governments might also include elements in their apologies that are not present in most theoretical analyses of interpersonal apologies. A government attuned to the psychological concerns of both a previously victimized minority and the majority might include four additional components in its apologies. First, the government might choose to address the identity concerns of the minority. A long-standing historical injustice and the absence of prior apologies may imply that society has a low regard for the victimized minority. A perception that their group is devalued is likely to damage the social identities of current members of that group (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Governments can use an apology as an occasion to offset the harmful psychological implications of prior injustices by emphasizing the important and unique contributions of the victimized group to society as a whole. Such praise would meet the identity concerns of present generations of the victimized group by affirming their positive qualities and demonstrating that they are valued.

Second, governments might seek to phrase apologies in ways that minimize resistance from the nonvictimized majority of the population. Opinion polls indicate that majorities sometimes strongly oppose government apologies for historical injustices (Viles, 2002). The opposition of majority groups appears to reflect, in part, a belief that a government apology offered on their behalf implicates them in the injustice (Blatz, Ross, & Starzyk, 2008). This impression of implied responsibility is a straightforward generalization from interpersonal apologies. Individuals express remorse for their actions primarily when they are personally responsible for a transgression. They tend not to apologize when they are innocent of wrong doing. By extension, if the majority bears no responsibility for a historical harm, why should a government apologize on their behalf or offer "their" tax money to alleviate the damage?

When many members of the majority oppose a government apology, a previously victimized group is unlikely to accept it or benefit psychologically from it. Also, a government is unlikely to offer an apology when it anticipates a major political backlash. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton presented the objections of the White majority as a major reason for not offering an official government apology for slavery (Brooks, 1999). What might governments say in their apologies to defuse potential objections by the majority? They could emphasize that current members of the majority are blameless. Indeed, the government could use the apology as an occasion to praise the majority. In their apologies, governments could assert that the minority group is great, but so too is the majority.

Third, government apologies for historical injustices might include praise for the current system of laws and government. According to social psychological theorists (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner, 1980), people are highly motivated to believe that they live in a just and fair country. Knowledge of a historical wrong doing can threaten this psychologically important belief. Individuals sometimes respond to such threats by blaming the victims of the injustice for their own suffering (Lerner, 1980). To decrease perceived threat to the system and minimize victim blame, a government apology could emphasize the fairness of the present system.

Fourth, a government apology might also decrease perceived threat to the system by explicitly dissociating the present system from the system that permitted the injustice to occur. While apologizing, a government could note that the injustice occurred long ago, when the laws, values, and beliefs were very different from what they are today. By distancing and condemning the actions of past governments, the current government demonstrates its commitment to justice.

In the next section we examine a set of government apologies to assess the degree to which they include the 10 elements of apologies that we have discussed. A few previous researchers have conducted linguistic analyses of the content of single government apologies for historical injustices (e.g., Harter, Stephens & Japp, 2000). We are unaware of previous efforts to examine a more representative set of government apologies with the goal of assessing whether their content includes the elements of an interpersonal apology and addresses psychological needs aroused by historical injustices.

### **How Governments Apologize**

We composed a list of official government apologies that have been offered by various countries for domestic and international injustices. We began our analysis by obtaining a comprehensive list of political apologies prepared by Dodds (2003). From this list, we considered apologies for analysis only if they met several criteria. For search and comprehension purposes, the apology had to be available in English. Although most of the apologies in our final list were originally

presented in English, several were English translations of apologies initially presented in other languages (e.g., Japanese). Second, the apology had to be offered for events that were intentional rather than accidental. Accidents do not meet our identification of historical injustices as deliberate discriminatory actions by governments. Third, because we focus on historical injustices committed by governments against aggrieved groups, we selected apologies that governments offered to identifiable groups rather than single individuals (e.g., a person unjustly convicted of a crime). Fourth, the government statement had to contain the core element of an apology, an expression of remorse (Meier, 1998; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schlenker & Darby, 1981) offered on behalf of the government or country. Fifth, the apology had to be issued by a government institution (e.g., parliament) or leader (e.g., president, prime minister, or sovereign). Apologies offered by citizens or lesser government officials did not meet our definition of official and sanctioned government acts. Finally, because we are studying the content of apologies, we did not include nonverbal expressions of remorse, such as German Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling before the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial monument, or public speeches justifying a refusal to apologize (e.g., Augoustinos & LeCouteur, 2004). In the end, we compiled a list of 13 apologies offered in the last two decades. Brief descriptions of the injustices are provided in Table 1. (A document presenting the complete apologies is available at [https://artsweb.uwaterloo.ca/~kschuman/political\\_apology/.](https://artsweb.uwaterloo.ca/~kschuman/political_apology/))

Two raters independently examined each of the apologies for the presence of the 10 elements (see Table 2). Their percent agreement on the elements present in each of the apologies was high (96%). The raters resolved disagreements through discussion. We begin our description of the results with the most common elements and proceed through the list.

All apologies included expressions of remorse, such as “we regret” or “we apologize,” because this was a criterion for apologies to be included in the set. All 13 apologies also acknowledged that the acts committed against the victims were unjust. For example, in his apology to African American victims of the Tuskegee syphilis study, President Bill Clinton declared: “You did nothing wrong, but you were grievously wronged” (“Tuskegee Apology,” 1997). All 13 apologies described the harm produced by the governments’ actions and acknowledged the victims’ suffering. For example, in his apology before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the former President of South Africa, F. W. de Klerk, explicitly described the harm and suffering caused by Apartheid.

“I apologize . . . to the millions of South Africans who suffered the wrenching disruption of forced removals in respect of their homes, businesses and land. Who over the years suffered the shame of being arrested for past law offences. Who over the decades and indeed centuries suffered the indignities and humiliation of racial discrimination. Who for a long time were prevented from exercising their full democratic rights in the

**Table 1.** Included Apologies and Descriptions of the Injustices

Injustice	Apologizer	Description of Injustice
Internment of Japanese Americans	Congress (1988) George Bush (1991) Bill Clinton (1993)	In 1942, 110,000 ethnic Japanese (62% American-born citizens) were interned in Relocation Centers with inadequate housing, clothing, and food. Most experienced significant property losses.
Internment of Japanese Canadians	Brian Mulroney (1988)	In 1942, 22,000 Japanese Canadians (59% Canadian-born citizens) were expelled from homes in British Columbia (BC) and interned under poor conditions. Their property was sold off by the government to pay for internment. After the war, internees were forced to leave BC.
Overthrow of Kingdom of Hawaii	Congress (1993)	In 1893, U.S. naval forces invaded the sovereign Hawaiian nation, took over government buildings, disarmed the Royal Guard, and declared a provisional government. In 1898, the United States Congress approved a joint resolution of annexation creating the U.S. Territory of Hawaii.
WWII Comfort Women	Tomichii Murayama (1995)	During WWII, an estimated 200,000 girls and women were taken from their homes in Korea, China, and other Japanese-occupied regions, and placed in brothels to be used as sex slaves for the Japanese army.
Japanese WWII Crimes	Tomichii Murayama (1995)	In the 1930s and 1940s, the Japanese military murdered between 6 and 10 million East Asian civilians.
Seizure of Maori Land	Queen Elizabeth II (1995)	Under the New Zealand Settlement Act of 1863, over a million acres of Waikato land was confiscated. The Maori resisted the confiscation and many died in the fighting that followed.
Apartheid	F. W. de Klerk (1997)	In 1948, the National Party implemented racial segregation in South Africa. Blacks were forced to move to 'homelands' and lost their South African citizenship. In 1953, the Separate Amenities Act led to separate beaches, buses, hospitals, and schools. Blacks and "Coloreds" were denied voting rights and obliged to carry identity documents to prevent migration and visitation to 'White' areas.

Table 1. (cont.)

Injustice	Apologizer	Description of Injustice
Tuskegee Syphilis Study	Bill Clinton (1997)	In 1932, the U.S. Public Health Service began a 40-year study of the progression of syphilis with 600 (399 with syphilis) Black men. They were never told they had syphilis, nor treated for it. By 1947 penicillin was the standard treatment for syphilis, but the participants were left untreated.
Australian Aboriginal Stolen Generations	John Howard (1999)	Between 1915 and 1969, approximately 100,000 Australian Aboriginal children were removed from their families by the government and church and placed in internment camps, orphanages, and other institutions. Some were adopted or placed in foster homes. The children in institutions were forbidden to speak their language, received little education, and lived under poor conditions. Physical and sexual abuse was common.
Chinese Canadian Head Tax and Exclusion Act	Stephen Harper (2006)	In 1885, the Canadian Government levied a Head Tax on all Chinese immigrants to restrict the number of Chinese entering Canada. The \$50 tax was eventually increased to \$500, the equivalent of two years wages. The Chinese Exclusion Act barred all Chinese from entering Canada from 1923–1947.
British Role in Slave-Trade	Tony Blair (2006)	Between 1660 and 1807, over three million Africans were sent to the Americas in British ships. Many died during capture and transportation.

**Table 2.** Elements Present in 13 Included Apologies

Injustice	Element Number									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Internment of Japanese Americans										
Civil Liberties Act (1988)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				
George Bush (1991)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Bill Clinton (1993)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
Internment of Japanese Canadians (1988)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Overthrow of Kingdom of Hawaii (1993)	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓			
WWII Comfort Women (1995)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Japanese WWII Crimes (1995)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
Seizure of Maori Land (1995)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Apartheid (1997)	✓	✓	✓	✓						
Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1997)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Australian Stolen Generations (1999)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chinese Head Tax/Exclusion Act (2006)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
British Role in Slave-Trade (2006)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Percentage of Time Element Present</b>	100	85	100	100	85	77	38	46	46	62

*Note.* Element 1 = Remorse; 2 = Acceptance of responsibility; 3 = Admission of injustice/wrongdoing; 4 = Acknowledgement of harm and/or victim suffering; 5 = Forbearance; 6 = Offer of repair; 7 = Praise for minority group; 8 = Praise for majority group; 9 = Praise for present system; 10 = Dissociation of injustice from present system.

land of their birth. Who were unable to achieve their full potential because of job reservation. And who in any other way suffered as a result of discriminatory legislation and policies.” (Brooks, 1999, p. 505)

The tendency to explicitly assign responsibility for the injustice was evident in 11 (85%) apologies. For example, in apologizing for the British Crown’s seizure of Maori land in Australia, Queen Elizabeth II stated: “The Crown acknowledges that its representatives and advisers acted unjustly” (Bennion, 1995). Blame was assigned to governments and institutions in nine apologies. For example, Prime Minister Blair stated that “British industry and ports were intimately intertwined in [slavery]” (Ten Downing Street, 2006) and President Clinton said that “The United States government did something that was wrong” (“Tuskegee Apology,” 1997) in the Tuskegee affair. Specific individuals were implicated in two apologies, including when Queen Elizabeth II blamed government representatives and advisors in her apology to the Maori.

A promise of forbearance (e.g., “this will never happen again”) was also present in 11 (85%) apologies. For example, in apologizing for the internment of Japanese Canadians during WWII, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney offered “our solemn commitment and undertaking . . . that such violations will never again in this country be countenanced or repeated” (Japanese Internment National Redress, 1988, p. 19500).

The final component of an interpersonal apology, an offer of repair, was evident in 10 (77%) apologies, in the form of either individual or community-based compensation. For instance, in apologizing for the Chinese Head Tax, Canadian Prime Minister Harper stated “that Canada will offer symbolic payments to living head tax payers and living spouses of deceased payers” (“Harper’s Speech,” 2006). Rather than giving payments to specific individuals, Britain offered restitution for its past involvement in the slave trade by increasing aid to Africa and launching an immunization facility that is projected to save the lives of five million African children a year (Ten Downing Street, 2006).

In summary, these political apologies tend to include many of the proposed elements of an interpersonal apology. As Tavuchis (1991) anticipated, these government apologies are far more comprehensive than the typical interpersonal apology observed by linguists (Meier, 1998). Indeed, eight of the 13 (62%) apologies contained all six of the elements associated with an interpersonal apology. We proposed that government apologies may contain elements not commonly found in interpersonal apologies to address psychological concerns more specific to historical injustices. We obtained some evidence for the proposed additional elements, but they tended to be included less frequently than the interpersonal elements.

Eight (62%) apologies explicitly dissociated the present system from the one in which the injustice occurred. For example, in apologizing for the Chinese Head Tax, Canadian Prime Minister Harper emphasized that the tax “was a product of a profoundly different time” and “lies far in our past” (“Harper’s Speech,” 2006). Apologizing for Britain’s role in the transatlantic slave trade, Prime Minister Blair stated: “It is hard to believe that what would now be a crime against humanity was legal at the time” (Ten Downing Street, 2006).

Six (46%) apologies praised the majority group. For example, in apologizing for Japanese war crimes, Prime Minister Murayama referred to the “wisdom and untiring effort of each and every one of our citizens” in rebuilding a peaceful and prosperous Japan (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1995). Similarly, in apologizing for the Chinese Canadian Head Tax, Prime Minister Harper noted that “Canadians are a good and just people, acting when we’ve committed a wrong” (Harper’s Speech, 2006). Two of the six apologies that praised the majority also explicitly absolved current members of the majority group from any blame for the injustice. For instance, Australian Prime Minister Howard declared that “. . . for the overwhelming majority of the current generations of Australians, there was no personal involvement of them or of their parents” (Motion of Reconciliation, 1999, p. 9207).

Six (46%) apologies also offered explicit praise for the current system of government and laws. For instance, in Prime Minister Mulroney’s apology to Japanese Canadian internment victims, he stressed the current system’s commitment to equality and fairness for all:

“We are tolerant people who live in freedom in a land of abundance. That is the Canada of our ancestors. That is the Canada our ancestors worked to build. That is the kind of country we want to leave our children. . . . A Canada that at all times and in all circumstances works hard to eliminate racial discrimination at home and abroad.” (Japanese Internment National Redress, 1988, p. 19499)

Surprisingly, only five (38%) of the apologies included praise for the targeted minority group. In his apology for Britain’s role in trans-Atlantic slavery, Prime Minister Blair referred to “the enormous contribution today of Black African and Caribbean communities to our nation” (Ten Downing Street, 2006).

### A Perfect Apology?

Many legal scholars and historians argue that a collective response to historical injustice, such as official government apologies, is necessary to heal the wounds caused by past harms (e.g., Barkan, 2000; Brooks, 1999; Minow, 2002). These scholars assume that, in the absence of amends, the wounds from an injustice continue to fester, causing resentment and conflict. As evidence, scholars note that Japan’s unwillingness to apologize officially for war crimes it committed during WWII has prevented reconciliation with harmed groups,<sup>2</sup> while Germany’s provision of compensation to some victim groups has facilitated favorable relations with former enemies and victimized groups (Barkan, 2000). It is difficult to draw general lessons from such examples, however, because the situations and groups involved vary in many ways.

We have conducted social psychological studies to complement the work of these scholars by studying reactions to official apologies under controlled conditions that are lacking in the real world. Our research, too, has limitations; for example, the participants often have less at stake than those studied by legal scholars. By using different methods and theory, we hope to make significant progress in tandem with scholars from other disciplines.

In one study, we examined whether even the most comprehensive apology yields the benefits proposed by previous scholars. Of the 13 apologies included in our analysis above, three stood out for their inclusion of all, or all but one, of the 10 elements: Australian Prime Minister Howard’s apology to indigenous Australians, British Prime Minister Blair’s Apology for Britain’s role in trans-Atlantic slavery, and Canadian Prime Minister Harper’s apology for the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act. In our research, we chose to focus on the latter injustice and apology because our research participants were Canadian.

<sup>2</sup> Some Japanese government officials, including Prime Minister Murayama, have apologized, but the Japanese parliament (Diet) has not officially endorsed these individual apologies; also, some earlier apologies have been challenged by members of the Diet and subsequent Prime Ministers.

Between 1885 and 1923, the Canadian government, fueled by racism and xenophobia, levied a Head Tax on Chinese immigrants to limit immigration. In 1923, the government implemented the Exclusion Act, which barred all Chinese from entering the country. This racist act remained in force until it was revoked in 1947 (Dyzenhaus & Moran, 2006). Because of these laws, many husbands lived apart from their families for decades because they could not afford the onerous tax, or their family was barred from entering the country. In 2006, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an apology on behalf of the Canadian government for the Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act. See the appendix for the entire apology.

We surveyed Chinese and non-Chinese students at a Canadian university one month before and one month after Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered his official apology and reparations package (Blatz, Ross, Day, & Schryer, 2008). We were unable to recruit any direct victims of the Head Tax as fewer than 30 are alive today ("Compensation Offered," 2006). When we conducted our initial survey before the apology was offered, it was unclear whether Harper would honor his earlier election promise to provide an apology. At both times, participants responded to our questions after reading a description of the Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act. We subsequently surveyed a sample of the original respondents after Harper offered an official government apology to the entire Chinese Canadian community, which included financial compensation of \$20,000 to Head Tax payers or their surviving spouses. At the second session, all participants read the entire text of Harper's apology. We recruited 60% of Time 1 participants (60% of Chinese, 61% of non-Chinese) at Time 2.

After the apology and financial reparations were offered, both groups evaluated the Canadian government more favorably, suggesting that the apology improved people's faith in the social system. Both groups also evaluated Canadians of European heritage more positively after the apology. The apology seemed to have no effect, however, on participants' evaluations of Chinese Canadians as a group. Also, instead of increasing sympathy for Head Tax payers, the apology was followed by a decline in sympathy in both Chinese and non-Chinese Canadian participants. Conceivably, the decline occurred because some victims (albeit very few) received financial compensation. Finally, the apology was not associated with an increase in Canadian identity among members of either group. There is thus some, but not extensive, support on these measures for the claim that government apologies for historical injustices are beneficial.

As noted earlier, public opinion polls indicate that, before apologies are offered, members of a victimized minority tend to favor while members of the nonvictimized majority tend to oppose government apologies for historical injustices (e.g., Viles, 2002). Ironically, there are reasons to suppose that the majority might be even more satisfied than the victimized minority with an apology or compensation *after* it has been offered. Apologies supposedly restore justice by condemning past harms, while compensation supposedly restores justice by

repairing these harms; however, apologies and compensation fail to completely restore justice for the minority because such actions cannot turn back the clock and eliminate the harm. The magnitude of the injustice and the relative inadequacy of redress is likely more obvious to the previously victimized minority than to the majority (Minow, 2002). Also, experimental research on negotiations indicates that people evaluate their own side's offers more favorably than equivalent offers by the opposition (Curhan, Neale, & L. Ross, 2004; Ross & Ward, 1995). Similarly, members of the majority may judge redress that is offered on their behalf as more satisfactory than would members of the targeted minority.

There is little research on how members of the targeted minority and the nonvictimized majority evaluate apologies that governments have offered. Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, and Manstead (2006) examined reactions of the majority to a government apology, but these researchers focused on collective guilt instead of satisfaction with the apology. We (Blatz et al., 2008) examined participants' satisfaction with Harper's apology after he offered it. Although both groups reported considerable satisfaction with Harper's offer, Chinese participants evaluated the apology less favorably than their non-Chinese counterparts did. Chinese participants were more skeptical than non-Chinese about the government's intentions: Chinese participants were more inclined to view the apology as an attempt to win Chinese Canadian votes in the next election. Finally, Chinese participants were more likely to view the negative effects of the Head Tax on the Chinese Canadian community as persisting, despite the apology. Reported identification with Canada or Chinese Canadians did not moderate any of these group differences.

Despite the group differences, it is important to emphasize that both Chinese and non-Chinese respondents were generally quite satisfied with the apology. Clearly, one study with university student participants is not definitive, but our results suggest that members of the previously victimized minority and especially the nonvictimized majority support comprehensive government apologies for historical injustices after the apologies have been offered. If additional research corroborates this finding, government leaders could perhaps be less concerned about potential negative political implications of apologizing for historical injustices.

### **The Effects of Partial Redress**

The Harper apology contained all but one of the postulated apology elements. Many of the government apologies appearing in Table 1 are less comprehensive. It is not evident how members of the victimized minority and the nonvictimized majority would respond to less thorough apologies. Some of our additional research assesses the effects of less complete apologies. Particularly, we have studied the effects of withholding offers of repair from apologies. Scholarly debates about the content of apologies often concern whether or not to include financial compensation along with expressions of remorse. For example,

according to Minow (2002), an apology without financial compensation can seem insincere and manipulative. An apology that seems manipulative is not likely to promote reconciliation or satisfy identity and justice worries.

We conducted several studies to examine when withholding financial compensation undermines the effectiveness of an expression of remorse for a historical injustice. We framed our research in terms of Lee Ross's analysis of reactive devaluation (e.g., Ross & Ward, 1995). Ross reported that if, during negotiations, one side offers X but withholds Y, the other side will devalue X and show an increased appreciation of Y. Social psychological theories such as reactance (Brehm, 1966) predict this result.

Consider the implications of this reasoning for offers of apology. If a minority demands an expression of remorse and the government offers it, the minority may be satisfied with the apology. Suppose, however, the minority demands financial compensation and an expression of remorse. Suppose further that the government subsequently expresses remorse, but fails to substantiate the apology with financial compensation (as was the case for some of the apologies in our list). Both Ross and Minow would likely predict that the minority will devalue the expression of remorse. Similarly, the minority may be dissatisfied if the government offers financial compensation but refuses to provide an expression of remorse.

We examined these issues in a series of experiments (Blatz & Ross, 2008). In one study, conducted before the Canadian government promised to apologize for the Head Tax, we asked a group of Chinese Canadian university students to read a one-page summary of the Head Tax. Participants then read that Chinese Canadian lobby groups were demanding that the Canadian government express remorse and offer financial compensation for the Head Tax. We randomly assigned participants to read that the government offered (a) neither, (b) an expression of remorse but no financial compensation, (c) financial compensation but no expression of remorse, or (d) both compensation and remorse. In pilot testing we determined that our participants were generally unaware of the history of the Head Tax, so these manipulations seemed believable to them.

We predicted that members of a previously victimized minority group would devalue an apology when it fails to satisfy fully the demands of their group. We examined this devaluation hypothesis indirectly by assessing how forgiving participants felt towards White Canadians, evaluations of the government, and identification with Canada. As predicted, when either an apology or financial compensation was offered alone, participants felt less forgiving and identified less with Canada compared to when neither were offered or both were offered. The manipulations did not affect participants' evaluations of how negatively the Head Tax reflected on the government.

In another study, we sought to test more directly whether the negative effects of partial apologies were caused by reactive devaluation (Blatz & Ross, 2008). Reactive devaluation suggests that apologies for injustices without financial compensation should be perfectly satisfactory, unless the victim group also demands

compensation. If the group does demand compensation, but receives only an apology, then the apology should be less effective. The findings strongly supported this hypothesis.

The results from these studies resonate with real-world examples of how previously victimized groups respond to potential offers of redress. For decades, groups from the Canadian Chinese community requested that the government offer an apology and financial compensation for the Head Tax. For decades, various governments refused. In 2005, the Liberal Government of Canada finally proposed to atone for the Chinese Canadian Head Tax by creating a memorial fund to teach all Canadians about this injustice. The government also indicated that it would not issue an apology. An election ensued shortly after the government advanced this proposal and for the first time in Canadian history the Head Tax became a major election issue within the Chinese Canadian community. Rather than thanking the Liberal Party for being the first government to offer any compensation, many within the Chinese community were apparently angered by the government's failure to apologize (Keung, 2006). An offer of repair, unaccompanied by a statement of remorse, seemed to make matters worse.

More recently, the newly elected Conservative Party of Canada, the same political party that offered the rather exemplary apology for the Chinese Head Tax, reneged on a promise to include a statement of remorse as part of a \$1.9 billion settlement package for abuse of Native Canadian children in residential schools. The Aboriginal community decried the government's refusal to express remorse, emphasizing the healing effects of an apology: "We are extremely disappointed that the current government does not understand the significant role an apology would have in the healing and reconciliation process for our people" (Union of British Columbian Indian Chiefs, 2007). Although the victims have received monetary compensation from the government, they state that the refusal to apologize demonstrates a "lack of respect" from the government and argue that they need an apology to "move forward" (Union of British Columbian Indian Chiefs, 2007). Again, anecdotal evidence supports our experimental findings. Redress is less beneficial when the government ignores important demands of the victimized group. Recently, the governing Conservative Party promised to apologize for the residential schools program ("Throne Speech," 2007), probably because of the negative reaction to their previous refusal. Although these two examples focus on financial settlements that do not include apologies, our findings suggest that apologies without financial compensation would confront similar opposition.

Anecdotal and experimental evidence reveals that withholding financial compensation undermines the effectiveness of an apology. Possibly, withholding other elements of the apology would have similar effects. An apology without an expression of remorse might seem insincere, an apology without a promise of forbearance might fail to reduce concerns that a similar injustice could recur, and an apology that does not explicitly address identity or justice concerns might not quiet these concerns.

## **Additional Determinants of the Effectiveness of Government Apologies**

We have reviewed research demonstrating that, in some circumstances, political apologies can yield positive effects. However, researchers have examined only a few of the factors that might influence the success of government apologies. In this section, we briefly discuss some additional variables that might be significant.

### *Relationship Between Victimized and Nonvictimized Groups*

The quality of the relationship between the apologizer and the apology recipients is likely to influence the effectiveness of government apologies. Although this factor has received little empirical or theoretical attention, research by Nadler and his colleagues (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006; Nadler & Saguy, 2004) is relevant. In one study, Israeli-Jewish students responded to a Palestinian leader's expression of empathy for the suffering of Israeli-Jews (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). Participants who indicated greater trust for Palestinians reacted more positively than did those who indicated less trust. The research by Nadler and his colleagues suggests that the same government apology might be more or less effective depending on the degree to which the victimized group trusts the government or members of the majority.

Other qualities of the relationship might also influence whether or not an apology is successful, including the degree to which members of the two groups like and respect each other. Apologies may also help more when the two groups are motivated to coexist amicably in the future (Nadler & Saguy, 2004), perhaps for economic or political reasons.

### *Severity of the Harm and Timing of the Apology*

Governments typically apologize only for severe harms. The severity of the original harm is likely to influence the apology process in several ways. From the standpoint of the victim group, some harms are simply unforgivable (Minow, 2002). How do you forgive the people who enslaved or murdered family members? Similarly, governments may be unlikely to express remorse if they feel that an apology will fail to heal the wounds of past injustices and possibly increase anger and demands for compensation.

As a consequence, apologies may often be offered only long after the injustice. If little time has passed since the harm, the aggrieved group might not believe that the apologizer truly regrets the actions. Mistreated group members may question whether a government had an epiphany of regret a month or two after a policy is retracted. On the other side, government officials who were directly involved in the injustice might be inclined, for both psychological and legal reasons, to justify rather than express remorse for the harm. With the passage of time, the connection of the injustice to members of both the government and

victimized group decreases and apologies might be more likely to be offered and accepted. From this perspective, it is interesting that it is only in the past year that some U.S. states have expressed remorse for slavery, almost a century and a half after slavery was abolished.

*Victimized Minority's Commitment to Redress*

Members of previously victimized minorities do not speak with a single voice. For example, in a Gallup poll on slave reparations conducted in 2002, 37% of African American respondents rejected the proposal that the government offer cash payments to descendents of slaves. An additional 55% of African American respondents favored the proposal and 8% offered no opinion (Viles, 2002). With respect to redress for the Head Tax, some leaders of the Chinese community in Canada lobbied the Canadian government for decades. A 90-year-old former Head Tax payer even threatened to ride his motorcycle across Canada to raise support for government redress (Rossi, 2007). In contrast, the Chinese Canadian university students in our Head Tax studies seemed to know little about the Head Tax before participating in our research or reading media coverage of the Canadian government's apology. Most previously victimized groups probably contain individuals who are knowledgeable about the injustice and pursue redress, but they may be a small percentage of the group.

The reaction to an apology might differ as a function of a minority member's prior commitment to redress, a distinction that we and other researchers have not yet examined. For example, in our study of evaluations of the Head Tax apology, we found that members of the majority were more impressed with the apology than were Chinese Canadian participants. We do not know how Head Tax payers might have responded to the apology. Also, we cannot be certain how members of the Chinese community might have responded if they had been more aware of the injustice and more committed to obtaining a government apology. We do know that the Chinese Canadian National Council, a group that had been lobbying for an apology and compensation, responded enthusiastically to the government's offer:

"June 22, 2006 is a day we will all remember. On this day, in the presence of more than 200 Chinese Canadian seniors and family members, Prime Minister Stephen Harper rose . . . in the House of Commons and formally apologized for the Head Tax . . . and Chinese Exclusion Act. The collective sigh of relief was tangible, and the emotions that followed, will never be forgotten by those who were there to bear witness to this historic event. . . . Honorable redress is restorative. . . . Already there is a new confidence in the community and hope. Total reconciliation will bring about closure for all Head Tax payers and their families, and even for the broader Chinese Canadian community. Redress will have a transformative impact on all Canadians, the lesson being that the national dream of

a strong, united and inclusive Canada, is indeed possible.” (Chinese Canadian National Council, 2006)

### *Politics and Power*

Although we have focused on the psychology of government apologies, we recognize that whether governments apologize or not is a political decision. Governments probably try to gauge the demand for redress among members of the previously victimized minority and the opposition to redress among members of the majority. The Gallup poll that reported mixed support for slave reparations among African Americans also reported that 90% of White respondents opposed cash payments to descendents of slaves (Viles, 2002). A government confronting a divided minority and nearly unanimous opposition from the majority is unlikely to make redress a priority.

As another example, consider Germany’s response to Nazi atrocities, which is often cited as a model for government redress (Brooks, 1999). Even in this instance, however, political exigencies appeared to play an important role. Successive German governments have apologized and offered extensive reparations to Jewish victims, but offered relatively little to homosexuals or Romany people (gypsies) who were also targeted by the Nazis for elimination (Brooks, 1999). The allies pressured the Germans to aid the Jewish people, but seemed less concerned about other groups (Brooks, 1999). Similarly, the international community exerted relatively little pressure on Japan to provide reparations for its war crimes (Brooks, 1999). This lack of external pressure may help explain why Japan offered relatively little by way of apology or financial compensation. More recently, the premier of the Canadian province of Alberta offered an apology and over 140 million dollars of compensation to individuals who had been forcibly sterilized between 1928 and 1970 after being labeled as “mental defectives” (“Alberta Apologizes,” 1999). The government of Alberta “spontaneously” offered redress to the entire group only after it had been successfully sued by some of the victims (“Alberta Apologizes,” 1999). Redress is partly about healing and partly about justice, but a lot about pressure and politics.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

We have presented findings on how governments apologize and the effects of their apologies. The government apologies tend to be quite extensive and much more comprehensive than the spontaneous interpersonal apologies that appear in the literature (Meier, 1998). Indeed, some of these apologies could serve as textbook examples of what an apology should be according to various authors (Lazare, 2004; Tavuchis, 1991). One cannot judge the merits of an apology, however, only by examining its contents. To examine the effectiveness of an apology, one also has to assess the reactions of the victim group. Our experimental

studies of victim group reactions do not support Minow's (2002) contention that an apology for a historical injustice will be deemed inadequate if it fails to include financial compensation. What matters, according to our data, is not incorporating every element of an apology, but rather addressing the specific demands and psychological needs of those receiving the apology. We found that a statement of remorse could be effective—but not if the victim group had been demanding financial compensation as well. In different circumstances different groups make different demands. When some of the victimized group's major demands are ignored, apologies will likely be less effective. When tailored to match the concerns of the victim group, apologies appear to contribute to the process of healing and reconciliation.

As with interpersonal apologies, there is no categorical formula for what is likely to work. In the interpersonal domain a simple "sorry" will often be sufficient, but not always. We suspect, however, that victims of transgressions and members of previously victimized groups will rarely fault you for offering an apology that is too extensive. Perhaps the best advice to ordinary people and government leaders is: Apologize and do it as effusively as conditions permit.

## Appendix

### *Full Text of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Apology for the Chinese Canadian Head Tax and Exclusion Act*

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to formally turn the page on an unfortunate period in Canada's past<sup>(10)</sup>. One during which a group of people—who only sought to build a better life—was repeatedly and deliberately singled out for unjust treatment<sup>(3)</sup>. I speak, of course, of the head tax that was imposed on Chinese immigrants to this country, as well as the other restrictive measures that followed.

The Canada we know today would not exist were it not for the efforts of the Chinese labourers who began to arrive in the midnineteenth century<sup>(7)</sup>. Almost exclusively young men, these immigrants made the difficult decision to leave their families behind in order to pursue opportunities in a country halfway around the world they called "gold mountain." Beginning in 1881, over 15,000 of these Chinese pioneers became involved in the most important nation-building enterprise in Canadian history—the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway<sup>(7)</sup>. From the shores of the St. Lawrence, across the seemingly endless expanses of shield and prairie, climbing the majestic Rockies, and cutting through the rugged terrain of British Columbia.—This transcontinental link was the ribbon of steel that bound our fledgling country together. It was an engineering feat—one for which the back-breaking toil of Chinese labour-

ers was largely responsible—That was instrumental to the settlement of the West and the subsequent development of the Canadian economy<sup>(7)</sup>.

The conditions under which these men worked were at best harsh, and at times impossible: tragically, some one thousand Chinese labourers died building the CPR<sup>(4)</sup>. But in spite of it all, these Chinese immigrants persevered, and in doing so, helped to ensure the future of Canada<sup>(7)</sup>. But from the moment that the railway was completed, Canada turned its back on these men<sup>(2,3)</sup>. Beginning with the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885, a head tax of \$50 was imposed on Chinese newcomers in an attempt to deter immigration. Not content with the tax's effect, the government subsequently raised the amount to \$100 in 1900, and then to \$500—the equivalent of two years' wages—in 1903<sup>(4)</sup>. This tax remained in place until 1923, when the government amended the Chinese Immigration Act and effectively banned most Chinese immigrants until 1947<sup>(4)</sup>.

The Government of Canada recognizes the stigma and exclusion experienced by the Chinese as a result<sup>(4)</sup>. We acknowledge the high cost of the head tax meant many family members were left behind in China, never to be reunited, or that families lived apart and, in some cases, in poverty, for many years<sup>(4)</sup>. We also recognize that our failure to truly acknowledge these historical injustices has led many in the community from seeing themselves as fully Canadian<sup>(4)</sup>.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, on behalf of all Canadians and the Government of Canada, we offer a full apology to Chinese Canadians for the head tax and express our deepest sorrow for the subsequent exclusion of Chinese immigrants<sup>(1)</sup>. *Gar nar dai doe heem*. This apology is not about liability today<sup>(8)</sup>: it is about reconciliation with those who endured such hardship, and the broader Chinese-Canadian community, One that continues to make such an invaluable contribution to our great country<sup>(4,7)</sup>. And while Canadian courts have ruled that the head tax, and immigration prohibition, were legally authorized, we fully accept the moral responsibility to acknowledge these shameful policies of our past<sup>(2,10)</sup>. For over six decades, these race-based financial measures, aimed solely at the Chinese, were implemented with deliberation by the Canadian state<sup>(2)</sup>. This was a grave injustice, and one we are morally obligated to acknowledge<sup>(3)</sup>.

To give substantial meaning to today's apology, the Government of Canada will offer symbolic payments to living head tax payers and living spouses of deceased payers<sup>(6)</sup>. In addition, we will establish funds to help finance community projects aimed at acknowledging the impact of

past wartime measures and immigration restrictions on ethno-cultural communities<sup>(6)</sup>.

No country is perfect. Like all countries, Canada has made mistakes in its past, and we realize that<sup>(10)</sup>. Canadians, however, are a good and just people, acting when we've committed wrong<sup>(8)</sup>. And even though the head tax—a product of a profoundly different time—lies far in our past, we feel compelled to right this historic wrong for the simple reason that it is the decent thing to do, a characteristic to be found at the core of the Canadian soul<sup>(8,10)</sup>.

Mr. Speaker, in closing, let me assure the House that this government will continually strive to ensure that similar unjust practices are never allowed to happen again<sup>(5)</sup>. We have the collective responsibility to build a country based firmly on the notion of equality of opportunity, regardless of one's race or ethnic origin. Our deep sorrow over the racist actions of our past will nourish our unwavering commitment to build a better future for all Canadians<sup>(5)</sup>.

*Note.* Elements are included in superscript. Element 1 = Remorse; 2 = Acceptance of responsibility; 3 = Admission of injustice/wrongdoing; 4 = Acknowledgement of harm and/or victim suffering; 5 = Forbearance; 6 = Offer of repair; 7 = Praise for minority group; 8 = Praise for majority group; 9 = Praise for present system; 10 = Dissociation of injustice from present system

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by a Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) Doctoral Fellowship to the first author, by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Doctoral Fellowship to the second author, and a SSHRC Standard Research Grant to the third author. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Craig Blatz, Department of Psychology, University of Waterloo, 200 University Ave West, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, N2L 3G1. E-mail: cwblatz@watarts.uwaterloo.ca

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