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## CHAPTER 13

# The Antecedents, Nature, and Effectiveness of Political Apologies for Historical Injustices

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*Abstract:* Throughout history, governments have acted with prejudice and cruelty toward groups of people who differ on some identifiable dimension from the majority of their citizens. At the time, these discriminatory acts often result from deliberate political choice and are approved by legislatures, courts, and the majority of citizens. When the abuses finally end and those who perpetrated and endorsed the discriminatory acts pass from the scene, successive governments must decide how to respond to demands for redress from the victimized groups. In this chapter, the authors discuss when and how successive governments respond to historical injustices, as well as the psychological implications of their responses for members of the previously victimized group and the nonvictimized majority. In particular, the authors focus on political apologies for historical injustices, examining their antecedents, nature, and effectiveness.

Throughout history, governments have acted with prejudice and cruelty toward groups of people who differ on some identifiable dimension (e.g., skin color or religion) from the majority of their citizens. In Western democracies, these discriminatory actions are typically endorsed by parliaments, a majority of citizens, and the legal system (Backhouse, 1999;

Brooks, 1999). When the abuses finally end, governments often refuse to apologize or offer compensation. In many cases, members of the aggrieved group persist in demanding redress, decades or even centuries later (e.g., for African American slavery, see Brooks, 1999). Meanwhile, members of the government, legal system, and majority who perpetrated and condoned the discriminatory actions pass from the scene. In the current chapter, we discuss their successors' responses to the original injustice, as well as the psychological implications of their responses for members of the previously victimized group and the nonvictimized majority. In particular, we focus on political apologies for historical injustices, examining their antecedents, nature, and effectiveness.

### How Do Governments Respond to Historical Injustices?

We use the term *historical injustice* to refer to discriminatory actions conducted by a previous government against a group of individuals sharing common characteristics (e.g., racial, ethnic, or national origins). The events are historical in the sense that they no longer occur—although their effects may persist—and members of the present government were not participants in the episodes. The former government's actions are unjust in that most people, as well as the legal system, would declare them to be legally and morally wrong if enacted today. Most of our examples of historical injustices concern harms committed against minorities living within the country in question, but some examples include harms committed against citizens of other nations (e.g., war crimes); still others include wrongs committed both within and outside of the country's borders (e.g., African American slavery).

When confronted with historical injustices, governments react much as individuals do to accusations of personal misdeeds, with a range of responses varying from denial to apology. At one end of the spectrum, governments reject claims that their predecessors committed an injustice. For example, Turkish officials typically deny the occurrence of the Armenian genocide of 1915 ("Armenian Genocide Dispute," 2006). Governments often bolster their disclaimers with explanations and justifications. The Turkish government acknowledges that Armenians were killed, but it disputes the magnitude and source of the carnage. According to their government reports, the killings occurred in the context of interethnic violence during World War I (WWI) and did not represent a systematic effort to destroy the Armenian population (i.e., genocide). Almost 100 years later, Turkish governments continue to restrict the availability of information about the episode to the general public. Orhan Pamuk, a celebrated Turkish novelist, was recently prosecuted for "insulting Turkishness" by writing about the

episode ("Controversial Turkish Novelist Wins Nobel," 2006), although the charges were eventually dropped following international protests.

The concept of "insulting Turkishness" is intriguing from a social psychological perspective. Apparently the Turkish government supposes that the Turkish social identity is threatened by accounts of these rather ancient grievances. Relevant social psychological research provides some support for the concerns of the government. Reminders of historical injustices committed by one's own country can have a negative impact on social identity, just as reminders of past glories can have a positive impact, especially among individuals who identify highly with their country (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Sahdra & Ross, 2007). It is difficult for governments to manage information about such episodes, however. The events last too long, involve too many people, and are often confirmed by official documents. For many years, the Japanese government denied that it played any role in forcing women into sexual slavery for the Japanese Army during World War II (WWII). Eventually a Japanese professor proved otherwise by publicizing documents obtained from the government's own archives (Brooks, 1999).

Rather than denying, minimizing, and suppressing information about past injustices, governments sometimes acknowledge, condemn, and even apologize for the actions of their predecessors. Of the various responses to historical injustices, apologies are perhaps the most psychologically intriguing. Why apologize for events in the distant past that you did not commit? Some politicians and scholars argue that an apology is powerful medicine that yields a host of benefits ("Harper's Speech," 2006; Lazare, 2004; Minow, 2002). Most important, perhaps, apologies for historical injustices are hypothesized to promote reconciliation and forgiveness. Politicians offering public apologies suggest that their statements of remorse will heal past wounds ("Apology to Residential School Students," 2008), "turn the page" (e.g., "Harper's Speech," 2006), and allow groups to put the injustice behind them (e.g., "Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee," 1997). As a result, members of the majority and minority can look forward to a just and harmonious future (e.g., Motion of Reconciliation, 1999).

Why do some politicians and scholars suppose that apologies have such transformative powers? In part, they likely generalize their beliefs about the effects of everyday interpersonal apologies to the presumed effects of political apologies. There are at least four problems with such a generalization. First, there is a lot of speculation and anecdotal evidence but scant empirical support for the hypothesis that everyday interpersonal apologies are wonderfully effective. We are not arguing that interpersonal apologies are typically ineffective but simply saying that there is little compelling research evidence establishing the conditions in which interpersonal apologies are or are not helpful. Second, in everyday life, people typically

apologize for fairly trivial transgressions (e.g., being late, bumping into someone; Schumann & Ross, 2008), whereas governments apologize for severe wrongs. Apologies for more serious harms may be less effective in promoting forgiveness than apologies for trivial wrongs. Third, interpersonal apologies often occur between people who generally trust and care for each other. Victims may forgive transgressions, in part, to preserve an existing strong affiliation. The relationship between a previously victimized group and a majority group or government may not be characterized by similar trust and caring.

Finally, a government apology for a historical injustice occurs in a very different social context than the typical interpersonal apology; although they are semantically similar. In everyday life, people apologize after they have personally committed a transgression. In Western cultures at least, individuals rarely apologize for another person's misdeeds unless they are directly responsible for the transgressors, as when parents apologize on behalf of their children. Also, individuals typically apologize to people whom they have directly harmed and do so shortly after the transgression. The situation is quite different when government officials apologize for historical injustices. They apologize for episodes that sometimes occurred before they were born. Also, they speak not only for themselves but also for the citizens they represent, some of whom may not agree that an apology is warranted. Furthermore, government apologies for historical injustices are often targeted at people who did not experience the injustice directly but have some connection to the original victims (e.g., descendants or members of the same religious or ethnic group). For example, the Canadian government recently apologized for a tax imposed on Chinese immigrants between 1885 and 1923. The apology was directed mainly at current members of the Chinese Canadian community, many of whom immigrated to Canada in the past few decades. It is not surprising, then, that opponents of government apologies for historical injustices often argue that these apologies are offered by the wrong people to the wrong people ("We Won't Pay," 2007).

### When and How Do Governments Apologize?

Whether or not government apologies possess transformative powers, their frequency has increased dramatically in recent decades (Lazare, 2004). This groundswell of apologies has been variously labeled an apology "epidemic" (Thompson, 2002, p. viii), "the age of apology" (Brooks, 1999, p. 3), the "new international morality" (Barkan, 2000, p. ix), the "global trend of restitution" (Barkan, 2000, p. x), and "the apology phenomenon" (Lazare, 2004, p. 7). In the past couple of years alone, seven American state legislatures offered official apologies for slavery. These apologies came more

than 140 years after the ending of African slavery in the United States and constitute the first official U.S. government apologies for slavery. Also in the past few years, the Australian government apologized for the Stolen Generations, and the Canadian government apologized for Canada's earlier mistreatment of various minority groups. The increase in apologies raises the following question: Why so many now? Have governments worldwide suddenly acquired a moral rhetoric? Are displays of government sentimentality simply a passing fad? To understand the roots of this new political morality, we examine factors that influence when governments act to redress earlier harms. As with interpersonal apologies, little experimental research exists on the motivations behind political apologies for historical injustices. We therefore base our analysis on actual government apologies that have occurred in the past two decades.

One important influence on how governments respond to historical injustices is political pressure from victimized groups. For example, by exhibiting passion, persistence, and cohesiveness in pursuing redress for their internment during WWII, Japanese Americans received one of the first of the modern political apologies (Brooks, 1999). Political pressure is magnified when victimized groups are represented by key individuals within the government (Lazare, 2004). Four Japanese American members of Congress fought vigorously for the Civil Liberties Act (redress for the Japanese American internment during WWII) when it was presented to the House and Senate, even providing narratives of their own war experiences. According to Leslie T. Hatamiya (1999), a lawyer and daughter of former Japanese American internees, this inside leadership was essential to the passage of the act. More recently, six of the seven U.S. states that apologized for slavery had substantial African American representation in the state legislature. This internal support provided the redress movement with the political power to reverse decades of inaction.

Demands by other governments may also influence whether redress is provided. Germany offered extensive reparations to Jewish victims of WWII partly in response to pressure from the Allies (Brooks, 1999). By comparison, successive German governments have granted little to other groups targeted by the Nazis for elimination, such as homosexuals and Romany people, who did not receive the same degree of external support (Brooks, 1999).

A second factor that can influence the likelihood of government redress for historical injustices is perceived resistance from the nonvictimized majority of citizens. In representative polls on slavery reparations, only 37% of White Americans supported a federal government apology for slavery ("Polling Report: Race and Ethnicity," 2008), and a full 90% opposed government cash payments to descendants of slaves (Viles, 2002). Former U.S. president Bill Clinton presented the objections of the White majority

as a major reason for not supporting an official federal government apology for slavery (Brooks, 1999).

A third influencing factor is whether other governments have apologized for similar harms and not suffered ill consequences. An earlier government apology that is accepted by the targeted victimized group, does not lead to further costly demands, and is generally approved by the majority seems especially likely to encourage subsequent apologies for similar injustices. When the U.S. government apologized and offered compensation to survivors of the Japanese American internment in August 1988, the Canadian government provided an almost identical redress package to survivors of the Japanese Canadian internment less than 6 weeks later. Canada would almost certainly have been more hesitant to act if the American majority had responded negatively to the U.S. redress effort. Similarly, in 2007, the state of Virginia became the first American state to offer an official expression of regret for its role in slavery. Six other states apologized within the next year, and more states are expected to apologize shortly. In support of the inspirational role played by Virginia's apology, Senator Tony Rand described the precedent set by Virginia as a major contributing factor to his decision to place an apology bill before the North Carolina legislature (personal communication, April 22, 2008). It seems likely that this series of state apologies, combined with the absence of escalating demands from African Americans or a significant majority backlash, will motivate an official apology from the U.S. federal government.

Finally, governments seem less likely to apologize when either too little or too much time has passed since the injustice. Governments may be disinclined to apologize soon after an injustice, in part because their current members supported the discriminatory actions. If they participated in the injustice, they are perhaps more likely to justify or deny the wrongdoing than to express remorse. Also, it is likely that shortly after the injustice, the attitudes of the majority of citizens have not yet shifted from acceptance to revulsion. With the passage of time, members of the current government are no longer directly associated with the injustice, and the beliefs and values of the majority have changed. The government can apologize for the past injustice while dissociating itself from the individuals who perpetrated the act.

When much time passes, governments may be reluctant to apologize for what they deem to be historical curiosities. The effects of the injustice will have seemingly dissipated, and there are no victims who need or demand an apology (Starzyk & Ross, 2008). As the recent spate of apologies for slavery indicates, however, apologies occasionally occur long after the episode ends. One explanation for such delayed apologies may be that negative effects of the injustice are perceived to persist. If members of the previously victimized group regard the effects of the injustice as continuing, they may demand redress long after the injustice has supposedly ended.

These four factors—persistent victim demands, minimal majority opposition, precedents, and time lapse—at least partially explain the modern “age of apology.” And with every new apology, the barriers to subsequent apologies will almost certainly continue to dissolve. Previously victimized groups will mobilize and persist in the hope of receiving similar redress, majority groups will acclimate to the process and offer less resistance, and governments will imitate the apologies of other governments.

### The Content of Political Apologies

Not every apology is created equal; the extent to which members of a previously victimized group benefit from receiving a government apology may depend on its content (Lazare, 2004; Negash, 2006). Linguists and psychologists have suggested that a comprehensive apology contains as many as six elements (Bavelas, 2004; Lazare, 2004; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schlenker & Darby, 1981): (a) remorse (e.g., “I’m sorry”), (b) acceptance of responsibility (e.g., “It’s my fault”), (c) admission of injustice or wrongdoing (e.g., “What I did was wrong”), (d) acknowledgment of harm and/or victim suffering (e.g., “I know you’re hurt”), (e) forbearance or promises to behave better in the future (e.g., “I will never do it again”), and (f) offers of repair (e.g., “I will pay for the damages”).

Theorists have hypothesized that a statement that contains more of these elements is superior to one that contains fewer elements (e.g., Bavelas, 2004; Lazare, 2004). There is little research, however, linking the comprehensiveness of an apology to forgiveness and reconciliation. Moreover, there probably needs to be a match between the severity of a misdeed and the comprehensiveness of an apology. A comprehensive apology for a very minor transgression may seem facetious. This matching of the comprehensiveness of the apology to the severity of the harm may help explain why over 90% of everyday interpersonal apologies consist of a simple “I’m sorry” or its equivalent (Meier, 1998).

Governments don’t apologize for minor historical wrongs. As a result, their apologies are likely to be more comprehensive than the typical interpersonal apology. Each of the six elements in a comprehensive apology could address important psychological needs in members of a previously victimized group. A government that expresses remorse for the injustice demonstrates good conscience and genuine concern for the victims and their group (Scher & Darley, 1997). By assigning blame for the injustice outside the victim group (usually to the responsible government or leaders), a government asserts the innocence of the victims. An admission of injustice assures the victimized group that the current government upholds the moral principles that were violated (Lazare, 2004) and is committed to maintaining a legitimate and just social system. By acknowledging harm and victim suffering,

a government validates the victims' pain and corroborates the victims' suffering for outsiders (Lazare, 2004). A promise of forbearance can help restore trust between groups; it indicates that the government values current members of the previously victimized group and is willing to work to keep them safe (Lazare, 2004). Finally, an offer of repair (e.g., financial compensation, land transfers, or memorials) substantiates the apology (Lazare, 2004). Repair demonstrates a sincere commitment by the current government to address the wrongs of the past and uphold justice (Minow, 2002). A government apology that includes these various elements should theoretically make the victimized group feel better about themselves, the majority group, their government, and their country. As we noted earlier, however, such effects need to be demonstrated, not assumed.

Research on social identity theory (e.g., Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and justice motivations (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner, 1980) has suggested that for political apologies to be effective, they will also need to include elements not typically associated with everyday interpersonal apologies. According to social identity theory, people are motivated to think highly of the groups to which they belong. Members of a group that has been subject to a long-standing historical injustice may feel devalued by society. This perception of low regard can damage the social identities of current group members (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Governments could use an apology as an occasion to offset the harmful psychological implications of prior injustices by emphasizing the important contributions of the victimized group to society. Such praise should satisfy the identity concerns of group members by affirming their positive qualities. An apology that calls for reconciliation also addresses the identity concerns of the victimized group. By communicating a desire for reconciliation, a government demonstrates high regard for the victimized group and an interest in repairing its relationship with that group. Perhaps most important, calls for reconciliation highlight the central goals of an apology: to promote forgiveness and healing, as well as improve relationship well-being.

Although most discussions of government apologies focus on their impact on members of the previously victimized group, apologies also have implications for the majority. An apology could threaten the social identities of members of the majority. Opinion polls indicate that members of a nonvictimized majority sometimes strongly oppose government apologies for historical injustices (e.g., Viles, 2002). Members of majority groups may feel that a government apology offered on their behalf implicates them in the injustice (Blatz, Ross, & Starzyk, 2008). To minimize this threat to social identity, governments could use the apology as an occasion for affirming the positive qualities of the majority group and explicitly

absolving them of responsibility for the injustice. By doing so, governments may reduce opposition to the apology.

According to theories of justice motivation, people are motivated to believe that they live in a just country where people deserve what they get and get what they deserve (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner, 1980). By acknowledging a major injustice, an apology could threaten this psychologically important belief. An apology that emphasizes the fairness of the current system and dissociates it from the system that perpetrated the injustice reduces this threat to beliefs in a just world. In their apology, government officials could also criticize the perpetrators for making unjust decisions and neglecting the needs of their people. By condemning the actions of past governments, the current government disconnects itself from the wrongdoing and demonstrates its commitment to justice.

There is also a downside to dissociating the past from the present. Members of the majority offer stronger support for redress when they view the victimized group as still experiencing negative effects of the injustice (Starzyk & Ross, 2008). It is difficult to establish objectively whether the effects of the injustice linger over decades or even centuries. Is the lower socioeconomic status of African Americans attributable to slavery and subsequent discrimination during the Jim Crow era, or are the origins more recent, and are African Americans themselves partly to blame? The answers to such questions depend, in part, on group membership. Relative to members of the majority, members of the previously victimized group perceive the effects of a historical injustice as lasting longer (Banfield, Blatz, & Ross, 2008). To encourage the majority's support for the apology and affirm the perspective of the victim group, governments may attempt a delicate psychological balancing act: They could note that the effects of the historical injustice persist, but they at the same time dissociate the current system from the original injustice.

### How Governments Apologize

We have speculated about the elements that governments could include in their apologies to address the psychological concerns of the majority of their citizens and of the targeted victimized group. With the growing sample of political apologies for historical injustices, we can examine the content of political apologies for evidence of these elements. Next, we assess the degree to which a set of government apologies included the elements we proposed. To obtain our sample for analysis, we composed a list of federal government apologies offered by various countries for domestic and international injustices. We considered apologies for analysis if they (a) were verbal and available in English, (b) were offered for events that were intentional rather than accidental, (c) were offered by a federal government

institution (e.g., parliament) or leader (e.g., president, prime minister, or sovereign) for events that occurred before the current government took office, (d) were offered to identifiable groups rather than individuals, and (e) included the core element of an apology, an expression of remorse (Meier, 1998; Scher & Darley, 1997). In the end, we compiled a list of 14 government apologies offered in the past two decades. These 14 apologies composed the first subset of our sample.

In the past year, seven U.S. states have apologized for their roles in slavery. These apologies are of special interest in light of the U.S. federal government's repeated refusal to apologize officially for slavery. These seven apologies composed the second subset of our sample. We analyzed the subsets separately, because there are intriguing differences in content of the apologies in the two sets.<sup>1</sup> Brief descriptions of the injustices are provided in Table 13.1. Two raters independently examined each of the apologies for the presence of the 12 elements (see Tables 13.2 and 13.3 for Subsets 1 and 2, respectively). Interrater reliability was high ( $K = .86$ ). We present the results of this analysis in order of frequency of appearance of apology elements in Subset 1, with the most common elements presented first.

All apologies in Subset 1 and Subset 2 included expressions of remorse, such as "we apologize" or "we regret"—the presence of such statements was a criterion for inclusion in this sample. Similarly, all apologies in both subsets acknowledged that the acts committed against the victims were unjust. For example, President Bill Clinton declared in his apology to African American victims of the Tuskegee syphilis study, "You did nothing wrong, but you were grievously wronged" ("Apology for Study Done in Tuskegee," 1997). All apologies in both subsets also described the harms caused by the government's actions and recognized the victims' suffering. Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada acknowledged the "tragic accounts of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect of helpless children and their separation from powerless families and communities" in his apology to former Aboriginal residential school students ("Apology to Residential School Students," 2008).

A promise of forbearance (e.g., "This will never happen again") was apparently more common in apologies from Subset 1 (93%) than in the states' apologies for slavery (43%). In apologizing for the Japanese army's abuse of comfort women during WWII, Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama declared, "To ensure that this situation is never again repeated, the Government of Japan will collate historical documents concerning the former wartime comfort women, to serve as a lesson of history" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1995a). The tendency to omit forbearance in the states' apologies may reflect a shared, though potentially unfounded, belief that there is little threat of slavery in the future.

Table 13.1 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. In 1942, 22,000 Japanese Canadians (59% Canadian-born citizens) were expelled from homes in British Columbia 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 British Columbia.
Internment of Japanese Canadians	Brian Mulroney (1988)	In 1942, 22,000 Japanese Canadians (59% Canadian-born citizens) were expelled from homes in British Columbia 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 British Columbia.
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 U.S. Congress approved a joint resolution of annexation, creating the U.S. Territory of Hawaii.
WWII comfort women	Tomiichi 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	Tomiichi 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.
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 Black men. They were never told they had syphilis or treated for it, even when penicillin became available.

**Table 13.1** Included Apologies and Descriptions of the Injustices (Continued)

Injustice	Apologizer	Description of Injustice
Australian Aboriginal Stolen Generations	John Howard (1999) Kevin Rudd (2008)	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. They 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 Exclusion Act barred all Chinese from entering Canada from 1923 to 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.
U.S. states' roles in slave trade	Virginia (2007) Maryland (2007) North Carolina (2007) Alabama (2007) New York (2007) New Jersey (2008) Florida (2008)	Between 1654 and 1865, slavery was legal in at least 23 U.S. states. By the 1860 census, the slavery population in the United States had grown to over 4 million. Slave owners often treated their slaves inhumanely.
Canadian residential schools	Stephen Harper (2008)	In the 1870s, the Canadian federal government funded church-run schools with the aim of assimilating Aboriginals into the dominant culture. Children were forcibly removed from their homes and isolated from their families and cultures. Children were prohibited from speaking their native languages. Many children were physically and sexually abused, and many died because of poor sanitation, lack of medical care, and tuberculosis.

**Table 13.2** Elements Present in Subset 1

Injustice	Element Number											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Internment of Japanese Americans												
Congress, 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)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓				
Tuskegee syphilis study (1997)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
Australian Aboriginal Stolen Generations												
John Howard (1999)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kevin Rudd (2008)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act (2006)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
British role in slave trade (2006)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Canadian residential schools (2008)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
<b>Percentage of time element present (/14)</b>	100	86	100	100	93	86	50	57	29	43	50	64

*Note:* Element 1 = remorse, 2 = acceptance of responsibility, 3 = admission of injustice or wrongdoing, 4 = acknowledgment of harm and/or victim suffering, 5 = forbearance, 6 = offer of repair, 7 = praise for victimized group, 8 = call for reconciliation, 9 = continued suffering, 10 = praise for majority group, 11 = praise for present system, 12 = dissociation of injustice from present system.

Table 13.3 Elements Present in Subset 2

Injustice	Element Number											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
U.S. states' roles in slave trade												
Virginia (2007)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
Maryland (2007)	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓			
North Carolina (2007)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				
Alabama (2007)	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			
New York (2007)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓						
New Jersey (2008)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			
Florida (2008)	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓				
<b>Percentage of time element present (/7)</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>

Note: Element 1 = remorse, 2 = acceptance of responsibility, 3 = admission of injustice or wrongdoing, 4 = acknowledgment of harm and/or victim suffering, 5 = forbearance, 6 = offer of repair, 7 = praise for victimized group, 8 = call for reconciliation, 9 = continued suffering, 10 = praise for majority group, 11 = praise for present system, 12 = dissociation of injustice from present system.

Most apologies (86% in Subset 1 and 100% of the states' apologies for slavery) explicitly assigned responsibility for the injustice to governments and institutions. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd of Australia stated in his apology for the Stolen Generations, "The uncomfortable truth for all of us is that the parliaments of the nation, individually and collectively ... made the forced removal of children on racial grounds fully lawful" ("PM Rudd's 'Sorry' Address," 2008).

The final element of an interpersonal apology, an offer of repair, was present in most (86%) of the apologies in Subset 1 but in only one of the states' apologies for slavery. Repair came in the form of either individual or community-based compensation. In apologizing for the Chinese head tax, Prime Minister Harper stated, "Canada will offer symbolic payments to living head tax payers and living spouses of deceased payers" ("Harper's Speech," 2006). Rather than offering payments to specific individuals, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced that Britain would increase aid to Africa, launching an immunization facility that is projected to save the lives of 5 million African children a year ("PM's Article for the New Nation Newspaper," 2006). The tendency to omit repair in the states' apologies for slavery probably reflects the widespread belief that financial compensation to descendants of slaves is impractical and unnecessary (Brooks, 1999; Viles, 2002). We are surprised, however, that more states did not offer symbolic, economically feasible reparations, such as New York's establishment of a day to commemorate those who were enslaved.

Two of the apology elements seem designed to protect the present system from being tainted by the historical injustice: dissociation of the present system from the one in which the injustice occurred and praise for the current system. A majority (64%) of apologies from Subset 1 explicitly dissociated the present system from the one in which the injustice occurred, and 50% offered praise for the present system. In apologizing for the Chinese head tax, 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). In his apology to Japanese Canadian internment victims, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney praised Canada's current commitment to equality and fairness for all:

We are tolerant people who live in freedom in a land of abundance ... 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)

Similar statements were less common in the states' apologies for slavery, with only one apology containing dissociation and direct praise for the



current system. It is intriguing that it was the first apology, that by Virginia, that contained both of these elements.

A call for reconciliation was present in 57% of the apologies from Subset 1 and 71% of the states' apologies for slavery. Former Australian prime minister John Howard stated in his apology for the Stolen Generations that the House "reaffirms its wholehearted commitment to the cause of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians as an important national priority for Australians" (Motion of Reconciliation, 1999). The apology from Florida includes the following statement: "It is important that the Legislature express profound regret for the shameful chapter in this state's history, and, in so doing, promote healing and reconciliation among all Floridians" ("Florida Senate and House Express Profound Regret for Slavery," 2008).

We suggested earlier that governments could use apologies to affirm the social identities of members of both the previously victimized minority and the nonvictimized majority. Of the apologies from Subset 1, 50% contained praise for the minority and 43% included praise for the majority. In apologizing for Japanese war crimes, Prime Minister Murayama praised the majority by referring to the "wisdom and untiring effort of each and every one of our citizens" in rebuilding a peaceful and prosperous Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1995b). Of the states' apologies for slavery, 57% offered praise for the victimized group. The apology from New Jersey acknowledged that colonial laws relegated "the status of Africans and their descendants to slavery, in spite of their loyalty, dedication, and service to the country" (Assembly Concurrent Resolution No. 270, 2008). It then recognized "the faith, perseverance, hope, and endless triumphs of African-Americans and their significant contributions to the development of this State and the Nation" (Assembly Concurrent Resolution No. 270, 2008). Not a single apology from any state included praise for the majority group. In a majority of apologies in both subsets, governments avoided explicitly linking current social problems or suffering to the original injustice. Only 29% of the apologies from Subset 1 and 43% of the states' apologies for slavery made this linkage. As an example, Alabama described in detail the suffering that African Americans continue to endure because of slavery:

African-Americans have found the struggle to overcome the bitter legacy of slavery long and arduous, and for many African-Americans the scars left behind are unbearable. ("Expressing Profound Regret for Alabama's Role in Slavery," 2007)

As we noted earlier, there are disadvantages and advantages to emphasizing the scars left behind. In most cases, governments seem to have decided that the former outweighs the latter.

Relative to the states' apologies for slavery, the apologies in Subset 1 were more likely to dissociate the injustice from the present system, praise the present system, and praise the majority group. We suggest two opposing interpretations for these differences. One possibility is that the individuals who drafted the states' apologies felt confident that slavery no longer threatened the current system or social identities of the majority group, and therefore they felt little need to protect against these threats. Alternatively, the U.S. states may have omitted these elements because racism and inequality remain in the system. Statements of praise for the system could therefore appear disingenuous to the victimized group and might even anger them. The more frequent inclusion of statements of continued suffering in the state apologies (43% vs. 29%) provides some support for this second interpretation.

In summary, the political apologies in our sample, especially those in Subset 1, included most of the six proposed elements of an interpersonal apology. As Tavuchis (1991) anticipated, these government apologies are far more comprehensive than the typical interpersonal apology recorded by linguists (Meier, 1998). In fact, 10 (71%) apologies from Subset 1 contained all six of the elements associated with an interpersonal apology. All but 2 apologies from Subset 1 and all apologies from Subset 2 included remorse, acknowledgment of wrongdoing, acknowledgment of harm, and acceptance of responsibility. Our analysis suggests that these four elements constitute the core of political apologies.

In addition to the six interpersonal elements, we proposed that government apologies could address psychological concerns for social identity and justice that are more specific to historical wrongs. We obtained some evidence for the proposed additional elements, but they tended to be included less frequently than the interpersonal elements. Continued research in this area will reveal whether inclusion of these additional elements psychologically benefits the victimized and majority groups, whether some elements have negative effects on one group while serving the needs of the other, and whether including these elements achieves greater healing and reconciliation than is attained with the six interpersonal elements alone.

One predictor of whether governments chose to address identity and justice concerns is the number of years between the apology and the injustice. We examined the correlation between the number of years since the end of the injustice and the contents of the apologies across both subsets. Apologies for more recent injustices were more likely to include praise for the majority group ( $r = -.51, p = .02$ ) and current system ( $r = -.42, p = .06$ ), as well as statements that dissociate the present system from the injustice ( $r = -.42, p = .06$ ). These three elements theoretically defend against threats to the system and the social identity of the majority. The data are only suggestive, because our sample is small and includes a potential confound

between the type of injustice and the timing of the apology (the eight apologies for slavery followed the longest delays). As more governments apologize for historical injustices, we will be able to examine more thoroughly the hypothesis that apologies for recent injustices are more likely to include statements designed to bolster social identity and faith in the current system.

### The Effects of Partial Redress

Although several of the apologies in Table 13.1 included most or all of the 12 elements, many of the apologies in our sample were less comprehensive. Some elements may be more critical than others. Minow (2002), a legal scholar, speculated that an apology for a historical injustice that omits an offer of repair (e.g., in the form of financial compensation) seems insincere and manipulative. If members of a previously victimized group regard an apology from the government as insincere and manipulative, they are unlikely to benefit psychologically or be moved to reconcile. The element of repair is of special interest, as scholarly debates about the content of apologies often concern whether to include financial compensation along with expressions of remorse (Brooks, 1999).

Blatz (2008) studied whether withholding offers of repair undermines the effectiveness of an apology for a historical injustice. He based his research on Ross and Ward's (1995) theory of reactive devaluation. According to Ross and Ward, if one side offers X during negotiations but withholds Y, the receiving side will devalue X and show an increased appreciation of Y. Using this framework, Blatz (2008) predicted that victimized groups would be satisfied with an apology that did not include financial compensation if they had demanded only an apology. In contrast, if victimized groups demanded both an apology and compensation but received only an apology, they would devalue the apology and increase their desire for compensation. Similarly, victimized groups would devalue compensation and increase their desire for an apology if compensation was offered but an apology was withheld.

Blatz (2008) found support for these predictions in several studies. In one experiment, a group of Chinese Canadian university students read a one-page summary of the head tax. The head tax was a significant and discriminatory tax that the Canadian government levied on Chinese immigrants between 1885 and 1923 to limit Chinese immigration (Dyzenhaus & Moran, 2006). Participants read that Chinese Canadian lobby groups had demanded that the Canadian government express remorse and offer financial compensation for the head tax. Participants then read that the government had offered (a) neither, (b) an expression of remorse but no compensation, (c) compensation but no expression of remorse, or (d) both compensation and

remorse. In line with the predictions derived from reactive devaluation theory, participants felt less forgiving when an apology or compensation was offered alone compared to when neither or both were offered, although the compensation-only contrasts did not reach significance.

Of course, governments cannot always satisfy all of the demands of a previously victimized group. In some circumstances, partial redress may be all that is politically, financially, or legally feasible. The government is then in the position of choosing between partial and no redress. Governments will base their decisions mainly on political considerations, but from a psychological standpoint, the "right" decision is not self-evident. In the interpersonal domain, transgressors might almost always be wise to say "sorry." There is little evidence that an expression of remorse will hurt a relationship, and there is some evidence that it might help (e.g., Scher & Darley, 1997; Schlenker & Darby, 1981). With political apologies for severe historical injustices, however, Blatz's (2008) research indicates that an unsatisfactory apology may sometimes be more psychologically harmful than no apology, at least in the short term.

### Who Benefits From Redress?

Many legal scholars and historians have argued that a collective response to a 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, legal scholars and historians have noted that Japan's unwillingness to apologize officially for war crimes it committed during WWII has prevented reconciliation with harmed groups,<sup>2</sup> whereas Germany's provision of apologies and compensation to some victim groups has facilitated favorable relations with former enemies and victimized groups (Barkan, 2000). The Japanese and German situations differ in many ways, however, and it is difficult to draw firm conclusions. There remains relatively little research on when, how, and for whom political apologies are beneficial. Given the increasing frequency of political apologies, the time is ripe for an exploration of the effects of these apologies.

Legal scholars, such as Minow (2002), have argued that government apologies can foster forgiveness. But do apologies for historical injustices actually increase forgiveness? The evidence for this hypothesis from social psychological research is underwhelming. Philpot and Hornsey (2008) asked Australian university students to read descriptions of five injustices committed against Australia. They then manipulated whether an apology was offered for these events. Across four studies, the results consistently

demonstrated that even though participants were more satisfied with an apology than no apology, they did not report increased forgiveness.

Blatz (2008) examined the effects of government apologies on members of a previously victimized minority and members of the nonvictimized majority. In one study, he tested the impact of an extremely comprehensive apology offered by Prime Minister Steven Harper of Canada for the Chinese head tax. Blatz surveyed students of Chinese and non-Chinese heritage at a Canadian university 1 month before and 1 month after Harper offered his official apology and compensation of \$20,000 to head tax payers or their surviving spouses. Both Chinese and non-Chinese participants were generally satisfied with the redress package. Compared to the Chinese participants, however, the non-Chinese participants evaluated the apology more favorably, regarded the apology as more effective, were less cynical about the government's motives for apologizing, and were less likely to note inadequacies in the compensation package.

Ironically, members of the nonvictimized majority seemed more impressed by the apology. This pattern is perhaps not surprising. Most political apologies are offered for gross human rights violations, such as racial discrimination, slavery, sexual abuse, and genocide. Because of the severity of these acts, any form of redress fails to completely restore justice for the victims and their group. Even the sincerest of apologies cannot turn back the clock and eliminate the harm, and even the most generous of compensation packages cannot repair the damage. This inadequacy of redress relative to the magnitude of the injustice is likely more obvious to the previously victimized group than to the nonvictimized group (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, & Ross, 2004; Ross & Ward, 1995). Similarly, members of the majority group may judge redress that is offered on their behalf as more satisfactory than do members of the victimized group. If the impact of the apology on the majority group is (with hindsight) not entirely surprising, it is almost entirely overlooked in the scholarly literature. Most discussions of government apologies focus on the victimized group. Any discussion of members of the nonvictimized group usually centers on the circumstances in which they might be willing to support a government apology (Brooks, 1999).

It is important to note that none of the studies reviewed in this section included a sample of the direct victims of the injustice. Conceivably, victims of the original injustice would report greater appreciation of redress than would their descendants or other members of their ethnic group. Apologies for historical injustices, however, often occur long after the injustice, and few if any direct victims remain. The median passage of time

was 59 years between the end of the injustice and the government apologies that we reviewed. If apologies for historical injustices are to promote forgiveness and reconciliation, they need to be effective for the victims' descendants and broader social group.

The existing research concerning the impact of government apologies suggests that it may be better to give than to receive redress. Contrary to the concerns of some scholars and politicians (Brooks, 1999), there was no evidence in these studies of a majority group backlash against the apology or the victimized group. In fact, Blatz (2008) found that members of the majority *increased* their support for the apology after it had been offered rather than responded with hostility to redress offered by their government. Public opinion polls conducted before and after government apologies show comparable effects. For example, 68% of Australians supported Kevin Rudd's apology for the Stolen Generations 10 days after it was offered compared to 55% of Australians who supported the apology 4 days before it was provided (Metherell, 2008). Similarly, polls conducted in Canada on public support for a government apology for abuse in Aboriginal residential schools showed that support jumped dramatically after an apology was offered (Akkad, 2008; "Reconciliation With Aboriginals Possible for Two-in-Five Canadians," 2008). Such findings are consistent with system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Members of the nonvictimized majority justify a lack of government apology when none occurs and then justify an apology when it does occur. If additional research corroborates these findings, government leaders could perhaps be less concerned about the negative political repercussions of apologizing for historical harms.

### Summary and Conclusions

We discussed when governments apologize, how they apologize, and the reactions to their apologies. The government apologies in our sample were generally quite extensive and much more comprehensive than the 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 (Bavelas, 2004; Lazare, 2004; Tavuchis, 1991). One cannot judge the merits of an apology, however, by examining only its contents. To examine the effectiveness of an apology, one also has to assess the reactions of members of the previously victimized group and the nonvictimized majority. For example, although both Australian apologies for the Stolen Generations included all 12 elements that we assessed in political apologies, Kevin Rudd's apology has generally received more positive reactions from Aborigines and other Australians than John Howard's (Smith, 2008). One significant difference is that Howard had previously refused to apologize, arguing that Australia had no

need to atone for past injustices; in contrast, Rudd had promised to apologize during his election campaign. This prior opposition from Howard may have caused recipients of the apology and other Australians to suppose that his Motion of Reconciliation was insincere. A second difference between the apologies is that Rudd explicitly used the words *apologize* and *sorry*, whereas Howard expressed *regret*. Although an expression of regret communicates empathy for the victims' suffering, an apology statement communicates a willingness to accept moral responsibility for the injustice (Thompson, 2002). Many people quoted in the Australian media noted this distinction between an apology and regret, calling for a "real" apology after Howard's Motion of Reconciliation in 1999 (e.g., "Apology Still Needed," 2007; "Rudd Promises Apology to Aborigines," 2007). Thus, although our coding of the elements within political apologies informs us about how governments apologize for historical harms (and perhaps their intentions), it cannot directly speak to how members of the previously victimized minority and nonvictimized majority regard these apologies.

We reported studies by Blatz (2008) that do not support Minow's (2002) contention that an apology for a historical injustice will be deemed inadequate if it fails to include offers of repair. What mattered, according to Blatz's data, was addressing the specific demands of those receiving the apology. He found that words alone could be effective but not if the victim group had demanded financial compensation as well. One unexplored question concerns whether apologies and compensation satisfy unique psychological needs. Scholars have theorized that apologies restore trust and faith in the social order, whereas compensation indicates that the government is sincerely sorry and recognizes the victims as important members of society (e.g., Bright-Fleming, 2008; de Grief, 2008; Minow, 2002). It remains to be demonstrated whether compensation and the other 11 elements of an apology that we have identified serve their proposed psychological functions.

There are many other remaining questions concerning political apologies. For example, do offers of compensation need to be framed as symbolic rather than restorative to be effective? Members of previously victimized groups likely believe that no amount of money can right the original wrong. Consequently, they may regard compensation that is framed as restorative rather than symbolic as inadequate, even if the amount of compensation is actually greater. Also, we noted that many government apologies occur in response to political pressure. Are apologies less effective if they seem politically pressured rather than spontaneous? There is little research on the differential effectiveness of pressured versus spontaneous apologies in the interpersonal domain. One study of young siblings found that spontaneous apologies appeared to be more effective than apologies mandated by parents (Schleien, Ross, & Ross, 2008). A study of college students,

however, found that apologies demanded by observers of a transgression were as effective as spontaneous apologies (Risen & Gilovich, 2007). Our guess is that victimized groups will not penalize a government for apologizing in response to their demands. They may simply conclude that the government finally understands their perspective. Members of the victimized group may be less enamored with the apology, however, if they believe that it is insincere, for example, if they think the government is apologizing to buy their votes rather than to address a wrong.

To this point, legal scholars and historians have conducted much of the relevant research on political apologies. These scholars tend to assume that apologies will be effective, especially if accompanied by compensation. The research presented in the current chapter suggests that political apologies will not necessarily have the transformative powers that are commonly attributed to them. From a social psychological perspective, the issue is not whether political apologies are effective but when, how, and why they are effective. We presented research that begins to address these questions.

## Notes

1. A document presenting all 21 apologies is available at [https://artsweb.uwaterloo.ca/~kschuman/political\\_apology\\_OS/](https://artsweb.uwaterloo.ca/~kschuman/political_apology_OS/)
2. Some Japanese government officials, including Prime Minister Murayama, have apologized, but the Japanese parliament (Diet) has not officially endorsed these individual apologies.

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