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Running Head: AGE OF APOLOGY

**Apologies demanded yet devalued:  
Normative dilution in the age of apology**

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### **Abstract**

Dramatic increases in the issuance of political apologies over the last two decades mean that we now live in the “age of apology”. But what does this surge in frequency mean for the effectiveness of intergroup apologies in promoting forgiveness? In the current research we propose a paradoxical “normative dilution” effect whereby behavioral norms increase the perceived appropriateness of an action while at the same time reducing its symbolic value. We experimentally manipulated the salience of the age-of-apology norm prior to assessing participant (N=128) reactions to past unjust treatment of ingroup POWs by the Japanese during WWII. The apologetic norm increased victim group members’ desire for an apology in response to the harm. However, after reading the actual apology, the invocation of the norm decreased perceived apology sincerity and subsequent willingness to forgive. Thus, although apologetic trends may suggest greater contemporary interest in seeking reconciliation and harmony, their inflationary use risks devaluing apologies and undermining their effectiveness.

*Keywords:* intergroup apology, forgiveness, reconciliation, intergroup conflict, norms, normative dilution

Abstract word count: 157

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There has been a dramatic increase in political apologies over the last two decades, and we now live in what many call the “age of apology” (e.g., Brooks, 1999; Gibney, Howard-Hassmann, Coicaud, & Steiner, 2007). Dodds (2003) counts 47 national apologies in the five years between 1993 and 1997, but 146 apologies in the five years between 1998 and 2002. Although we focus on intergroup apologies in particular, there has also been a dramatic increase in public apologies more generally, from governments and institutions to their constituents, from organizations to their stakeholders, and from celebrities to their fans. Lazare’s (2004) archival analysis of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* identified an 85% increase in articles with the themes “apology” or “apologize” over the periods 1990-1994 (1193 articles) versus 1998-2002 (2203 articles).

Despite their increasing prevalence in public discourse, direct evidence for the effectiveness of intergroup apologies to promote forgiveness is mixed (for reviews, see Blatz & Philpot, 2010; Hornsey & Wohl, 2013). While some research suggests that intergroup apologies are effective in promoting reconciliation and victim group members’ positive intergroup attitudes (Blatz, Day & Schryer; 2014; Brown, Wohl, & Exline, 2008; Leonard, Mackie, & Smith, 2011), others have found limited effect (Chapman, 2007; Steele & Blatz, 2014; Philpot & Hornsey, 2008, 2011; Wohl, Hornsey, & Bennett, 2012). More recent theory argues that intergroup apologies are only effective under specific circumstances. For example, intergroup apologies may elicit forgiveness immediately following the apology event, but forgiveness diminishes over time as victim groups shift their focus to the (lack of) prosocial change (Wohl, Matheson, Branscombe, & Anisman, 2013). Other work suggests that in order for rhetorical gestures of reconciliation to be effective, it is necessary that the victim group trusts the intentions of the offender group (Hornsey & Wohl, 2013; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006; Wohl et al., 2012). Unfortunately, the level of trust required for judgements of genuine benevolent intent is often lacking following intergroup harm (Insko, Schopler,

Hoyle, Dardis, & Graetz, 1990), contributing to the limited empirical evidence for the effectiveness of intergroup apologies on forgiveness.

Of course, willingness to offer an apology is motivated by many reasons (including feelings of moral imperative) and need not be tied to utilitarian concerns about whether the apology “works” in promoting forgiveness. Nonetheless, the choice to offer an intergroup apology for historical transgressions is an increasingly prevalent aspect of intergroup life. Schumann and Ross (2010) theorize four potential reasons for the apology trend: increasing political influence of victimized groups, lack of opposition by offender group members, accumulating evidence that apologies are not costly to offender groups, and temporal distance from the injustice. Increased globalization may also translate into interest in reconciling old political conflicts, greater intergroup equality, and promoting exchange between societal groups (Deutsch et al., 1957; cf. Barbieri & Schneider, 1999). These factors may have resulted in offender groups’ greater willingness to apologize in recent years.

However, the rise of apologies as a response to intergroup harm may also be partly driven by the more normative use of the public apology as a repair strategy. In the age of apology, public statements of remorse are *en vogue*, occupying a significant share of media attention. Although the increase in apologies partly drives this public focus, the increasing prevalence of intergroup apologies in political discourse further increases demand for their provision. With increasing frequency, public apologies become the normative response to offense and insult. People use behavioral norms to inform their own thoughts and actions, particularly when there is ambiguity or question about the appropriate course of action (e.g., Asch, 1952; Festinger, 1950; Turner, 1991). So, as apologies become a more common response to intergroup transgressions, individuals (including victims) may be more likely to see them as an appropriate course of action.

However, we argue that there is also an ironic downside of apologies becoming a more

normative response. As a more expected everyday occurrence, an apology may also be less likely to elicit feelings of intergroup forgiveness because it is seen as a less sincere communication of offender group remorse. In both interpersonal and intergroup contexts, apology sincerity has repeatedly been shown to be a dominant antecedent of forgiveness (e.g., Allan, Allan, Kaminer, & Stein, 2006; Philpot & Hornsey, 2011; Wohl et al., 2012); insincere apologies are less likely to elicit forgiveness than sincere apologies. We argue that the normative nature of the apology act impacts this perceived sincerity. The prevalence of apologies reduces their novelty or numerical distinctiveness, and with it their cognitive salience and psychological significance (see Taylor & Fiske, 1978), leading victim group members to perceive an individual act of apology as less meaningful. Indeed, scarce commodities tend to be seen as more valuable (Cialdini, 1985) or more extreme (Ditto & Jemmott, 1989). Greater frequency of apologies may also result in more social desirability or normative pressures, alternative external factors to which an apology can be attributed (Kelley, 1972). These interrelated factors reduce the perceived likelihood that the offer of apology is motivated by internal factors such as conviction and sincere feelings of remorse. Thus, apology norms diminish the perceived sincerity and value of an offered apology, which is therefore less likely to promote forgiveness.

Beyond intergroup apologies, the paradoxical effects implied in these predictions illustrate a broader consequence of norms that has not yet been exhibited in the extant literature. Specifically, while norms may enhance the likelihood and perceived appropriateness of a particular behavior, those norms simultaneously undermine its communicative value. We refer to this as a “normative dilution” effect, where the norms surrounding a behavior devalue its symbolic worth. This effect may have gone unnoticed thus far in the norms literature because in many contexts the behaviors typically examined in the literature are themselves the valuable outcome. For example, pro-environmental behaviour is

considered valuable irrespective of what it tells us about the individual engaging in it. Norms surrounding environmental sustainability (e.g., recycling, pollution, energy consumption) are important because of their impact on individual pro-environmental behavior. However, our arguments suggest that these norms also result in a less positive evaluation of that behavior; as sustainability behaviors become more normative, people are less likely to care about individual cases of pro-environmental action or see them as indicative of sincere concern for the environment. Although a relatively unimportant side-effect of norms in many contexts (e.g., people do not typically recycle to gain the praise of others), the normative dilution effect becomes a critical consequence when a given action is valuable primarily because of the message it communicates to others. In such cases, normative dilution undermines the effectiveness of the very behavior that the norm promotes.

In the context of intergroup apologies, the communicative message is the core of its effect, as apologies that fail to communicate sincere remorse are ineffective in promoting forgiveness. Thus, the normative dilution effect implies an unfortunate consequence of living in the age of apology: apologetic norms may increase demands for intergroup apology, while at the same time decreasing their effectiveness in eliciting forgiveness. Practically, this suggests that as apologies have become more prevalent in recent decades, desires to see such public remorse has amplified, while victim satisfaction with that public expression of remorse has diminished. We experimentally test this causal assertion by examining the effect of apology norm salience. Specifically, if our arguments are valid, making apology norms salient to victim groups will: (a) increase demand for an intergroup apology from the offender group, but subsequently (b) reduce their willingness to forgive the offender group once an apology is provided, mediated by perceptions of apology sincerity.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

Participants included 128 Australian-born adults (48% female), aged 18 to 80 ( $M=52.2$ ,  $SD=15.2$ ) who reported having at least one parent who was also Australian-born. Respondents were recruited via panel survey and received payment for their participation. There was no deception; all information presented to participants was real.

Participants were randomly allocated into one of two conditions manipulating apology norm salience. Participants in the *control condition* were told: “This study is about intergroup apologies – apologies offered by one group to another.” However, participants in the *age-of-apology condition* were additionally told: “Scholars have referred to the last 20 years as ‘the age of apology’. Every day you can find news about a nation, organization, or celebrity issuing a public apology. A simple search for ‘political apologies’ turns up 4,617 references.”

Following the manipulation, participants were told that the study concerned the appropriateness of political apologies in response to World War II atrocities, and in particular Japan’s treatment of Australian prisoners of war (POWs). It was explained that there were 22,000 Australian POWs of the Japanese who suffered horrendous conditions and treatment, with over a third dying in captivity. A photograph showed starving POWs shortly after Japanese surrender.

Next, participants read a news article describing a formal apology from Japan to five former POWs representing Australia. The apology involved an official statement in the context of a 20-minute meeting with the foreign minister. The apology was described by one POW as expressing great remorse; a sincere and moving experience. Another POW said before the meeting that an apology would be worthless, but after the meeting said that the apology was “really good” and “very sincere”. Notably, past research indicates that only 1/10 Australians are aware that Japan apologized for World War II (Philpot & Hornsey, 2011). Additional measures assessing participant knowledge of Japan’s apology did not predict the outcome variables, nor did it moderate the effect of apology norm salience.

## Measured Variables

*Desire for an apology* was assessed prior to reading about the apology. The measure included the average of two items: “Do you believe the Japanese government should issue an official apology to Australia?” (1=*definitely not*, 7=*definitely yes*), and “How important is it that the Australian people receive a sincere apology from Japan?” (1=*not at all*, 7=*extremely*).

*Perceived apology sincerity* was assessed after presenting the article describing the formal apology. Two items asked: “Would you say that this apology was sincere?” (1=*definitely not*, 7=*definitely yes*), and “How sincere do you think Japan’s remorse is for their actions against Australian POWs in WWII?” (1=*not at all*, 7=*extremely*).

*Intergroup forgiveness* toward the offending outgroup was assessed with Philpot and Hornsey’s (2008) 30-item scale. The scale includes three facets: *affect* (“How do you currently feel toward the Japanese?”; e.g., bitter, good, warm), *cognitions* (“I think the Japanese people are...”; e.g., decent, honorable, immoral), and *behaviors* (“Regarding the current Japanese population, I would, or would want others to...”; e.g., get even, act negatively, show support). After reverse-coding negatively valenced items, all 30 item ratings (1=*not at all*, 7=*very much*) were averaged into a composite scale.

*National identification* was assessed prior to the study with a 6-item scale (e.g., “I talk about Australia as a good country to be a part of”; 1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*; Okimoto & Tyler, 2007). It is possible that those higher in identification may place greater importance on an intergroup apology, and/or be less likely to forgive (Brown et al., 2008). A *manipulation check* was also included at the end of the study: “Generally speaking, how common are political apologies?” (1=*extremely uncommon*, 7=*extremely common*).

## Results

Analysis of the manipulation check indicated a significant effect in the expected direction,  $F(1,126)=20.32$ ,  $p=.005$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.060$ . Participants in the age-of-apology condition

( $M=4.42$ ,  $SD=1.61$ ) reported that political apologies were more common than participants in the control condition ( $M=3.63$ ,  $SD=1.58$ ). Furthermore, regression analysis indicated that national identification did not moderate the manipulation of apology norm salience. However, it was a marginally significant predictor of desire for an apology. Therefore, national identification was included as a covariate in all subsequent analysis. See Table 1 for reliabilities and zero-order correlations.

For analysis of *desire for an apology*, ANCOVA revealed a significant effect of apology norm salience,  $F(1,125)=.52$ ,  $p=.035$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.035$ . Confirming predictions, participants in the age-of-apology condition ( $M=5.64$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ) reported wanting an apology from the Japanese more than participants in the control condition ( $M=5.12$ ,  $SD=1.66$ ).

A significant effect of norm salience also emerged on *apology sincerity*,  $F(1,125)=8.43$ ,  $p=.004$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.063$ . As predicted, participants in the age-of-apology condition ( $M=4.95$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ) perceived the apology from the Japanese to Australian POWs to be less sincere than participants in the control condition ( $M=5.59$ ,  $SD=1.05$ ).

Finally, a significant effect of norm salience emerged on *intergroup forgiveness*,  $F(1,125)=4.38$ ,  $p=.038$ ,  $\eta^2_p=.034$ . Confirming predictions, participants in the age-of-apology condition ( $M=5.05$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ) reported feeling less forgiveness toward the Japanese compared to participants in the control condition ( $M=5.48$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ). Indirect effect analysis using bootstrapping procedures (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) revealed a significant negative indirect effect of apology norm salience on intergroup forgiveness, through perceptions of apology sincerity,  $B=-.15$ ,  $SE=.058$ ,  $95\%CI=-.2803$  to  $-.0504$  (see Figure 1).

## Discussion

Consistent with our predictions, results indicated that making the “age of apology” norm salient contributed to victim group member reactions to the apology in problematic ways. While the salience of the apology norm increased participants’ desire to receive an

intergroup apology from a representative of the offending group, it also increased their view that a received apology was less sincere and, through this, resulted in reduced feelings of intergroup forgiveness. Thus, this study provides evidence of a normative dilution effect whereby a behavioral norm raises expectations of a behavior while (ironically) limiting its communicative value.

Notably, this pattern emerged even following a fairly strong apologetic statement, not a perfunctory expression of remorse (see Blatz, Schumann, & Ross, 2009; Steele & Blatz, 2014); the apology information was accompanied by statements from victims acknowledging its sincerity and expressing a desire to move forward. Thus, it is not that the apology was weak, insincere, or ambiguous in its intent. Nonetheless, a simple reminder at the start of the study that political apologies are quite common had a diminishing effect on victim group reactions to the apology. Furthermore, this normative dilution effect was tested within a real, meaningful intergroup context about a wartime transgression that the victim group continues to have strong convictions about (see also Philpot & Hornsey, 2008, 2011).

Although the current results evidence reduced forgiveness following the age-of-apology norm, the impact of the apology itself (relative to non-apology) is still an open question. Previous research – conducted without making salient the “age of apology” norm – has suggested modest or no effects of apologies on intergroup forgiveness (Hornsey & Wohl, 2013). Given this, it is possible that there are normative conditions where the apology is seen as sufficiently insincere that its provision might actually *reduce* forgiveness. Further research is needed that delineates the scope of the effect, and its impact on a broader range of conciliatory outcomes.

This study is important because it shows that normative dilution can undermine the value of a communicative act. When dealing with behaviors that depend on attributed symbolic meaning for their effectiveness (such as apologies), normative dilution becomes a

critical issue. While norms may raise the expectation of prosocial action, that expectation also devalues its symbolic meaning as sincerely prosocial. Of course, this effect might similarly apply to antisocial acts. For example, normative use of punishment (as communication of society's commitment to certain moral values) may not only enhance the demand for punishment, but also diminish the symbolic significance of a punishment and thus its capacity to effectively reinforce societal values as intended. These patterns might partly explain respondents' overconfidence in anticipated feelings of satisfaction following apologies (De Cremer, Pillutla, & Folmer, 2011) and revenge (Carlsmith, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2008).

Notwithstanding the theoretical contribution of this work, these findings also have important implications for modern political discourse. This research suggests that living in the age of apology amplifies a victim group's hunger for public expressions of remorse. But at the same time, the prevalence of such apologies mean that a victim group's hunger is less likely to be satiated by an apology, and that the apology itself is more likely to be seen as routine and carry less symbolic weight for victims.

There is both a pessimistic and an optimistic lens through which one can view this finding. The pessimistic lens is that the broad trends in contemporary public dialogue toward greater reconciliation and harmony-seeking have an inevitable downside in terms of undermining the effectiveness of public apologies, creating a vicious cycle of diminishing returns. A more optimistic perspective, however, is that this trend is indicative of an increased hunger for more substantial conciliatory responses, less symbolic oration and more real action. Perhaps this is how we can understand the trajectory of human "civilization": once basic rights become widely accepted, people demand even more wide-reaching rights; once steps are made to achieve justice, this defines our new normality, and people seek even greater justice aspirations; and once steps have been made toward a more peaceful world,

further steps toward intergroup accord become the new currency of goodwill.

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perpetrator groups' responses to the Canadian government's apology for the head tax on Chinese immigrants and the moderating influence of collective guilt. *Political Psychology*, 34, 713-729.

Table 1.

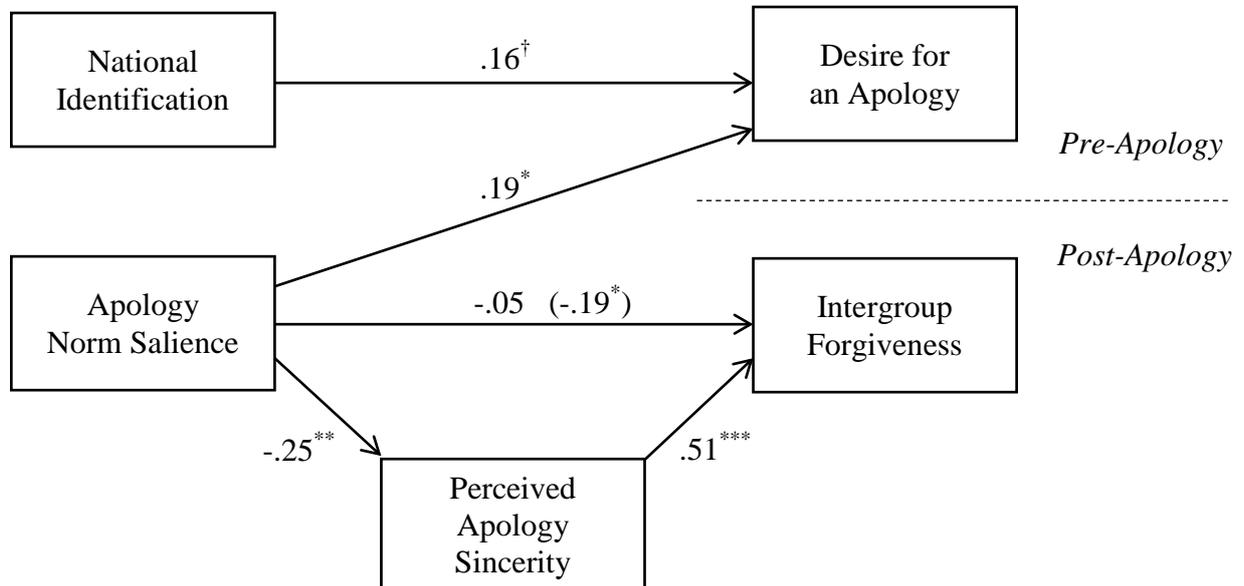
*Zero-order correlations and scale reliabilities*

	<i>Inter-item reliability</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Desire for an apology	$r = .84$	--		
(2) Perceived apology sincerity	$r = .72$	.01	--	
(3) Intergroup forgiveness	$\alpha = .97$	-.24**	.53***	--
(4) National identification	$\alpha = .92$	.14	.06	.04

Note: \*\*  $p < .005$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Figure 1.

*Summary of results depicted in a regression framework*



*Note:* †  $p < .08$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .005$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . Values are standardized regression coefficients. Value in parentheses indicates direct effect, prior to entering the mediating variable. National identification was included as a predictor in all regressions, but only significant pathways are depicted.