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By Joan Tabachnick and David Prescott

Repairing Trust: The Effectiveness of Apologies in Interpersonal and Intergroup Contexts

BOTTOM LINE
Results showed that apologies between individuals and between groups significantly increased trust. However, their impact was far greater with interpersonal interactions than the intergroup contact. Furthermore, the effectiveness of an apology was shaped by their emotional content.

RESEARCH
It has been well documented in the research that apologies are an effective way of restoring trust when that trust has been broken. By apologizing, the person who has caused the harm can begin to separate out their actions from their full identity (e.g. they are more than the sum of their worst actions) and acknowledge the wrongfulness of their actions. Further, they can reaffirm social norms and help change the dynamics enough to open up the option of reconciliation. This article asks whether apologies can have a similar impact on transgressions between groups.

Through an experimental design, Reinders Folmer and colleagues examined whether an apology that is effective at restoring trust between individuals can also be effective at restoring trust between groups. The authors recognized that increased barriers to effective intergroup apologies which included greater skepticism in terms of:
- Motives that might prompt them (e.g., avoiding consequences or punishment)
- Sentiments or emotions that they convey (e.g., insincerity)
- Extent to which it may translate to any system change in an individual's or the group's behavior

Their findings did confirm that apologies restored trust less effectively between groups than between individuals. This was particularly true when the apologies were grounded in secondary emotions (e.g., guilt and disappointment) which were perceived as less sincere in the intergroup interactions. Even though groups will share considerable skepticism initially in intergroup apologies, they may gain credibility over time if they are substantiated by trustworthy behavior. Although the study focused on emotional content, the authors also acknowledged the importance of their content and the other elements that may contribute to an effective apology such as explicit admission of responsibility and acknowledgment the impact of their actions and the harm that was done.

The authors also identified an important focus for future study by pointing out that most of the research in the past has focused on how individual and groups respond to an apology. There is little research about the processes that lead an individual or group to choose to provide an apology.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Professionals working with youth who have abused have long sought to include apology, clarification of responsibility, and steps towards reconciliation and reunification be a part of treatment whenever it is appropriate to do so. These processes have always involved a number of potentially high-stakes decision points. For instance, moving too fast can be re-traumatizing, while moving too slowly can impede family healing. Although the paper ostensibly focuses on apologies between groups, it offers many ideas of what makes an effective apology (for example, sincerity followed by behavior that reflects sincerity as a means of regaining trust). It offers empirical knowledge as well as visual guides for considering the processes involved.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

In the broader picture, this paper offers important insights for those looking at how communities of people heal from abuse. For example, the administrations of colleges and universities could do well to study this paper in their attempts to re-build trust in the wake of situations where sexual assault has led to student activism to demand safer spaces. It often appears that official statements and communications, despite the best intentions of those involved, create the appearance that administrative responses are guided more by legal considerations than what we know of effective and meaningful apologies. In particular, the paper emphasizes the need for clear indicators of behavior change when intergroup apologies are made. In the right context, this paper can go a long way toward healing differences on all sides of the debates. This is especially true when, ultimately, all sides want abuse-free environments.

CITATION:
Reinders Folmer, C., Wildschut, T., Haesevoets, T., Van Assche, J., & Van Lange, P. A. (2021). Repairing trust between individuals and groups: The effectiveness of apologies in interpersonal and intergroup contexts. *International Review of Social Psychology*, *34*(1), 14.

ABSTRACT
Transgressions and injustice are an inevitable part of social life, both in interactions between individuals and between groups. But whereas conflict between individuals typically impacts only few, conflict between groups can be harmful to many – as is illustrated by disputes between nations, political parties, and social groups. For this reason, it is crucial to understand how such transgressions can be restored. In interpersonal settings, there is considerable evidence that apologies can restore transgressions and enable victims and perpetrators to reconcile. It is unknown, however, to what extent the effectiveness of apologies in interpersonal conflicts may translate to conflicts between groups. The present research illuminates this question. In an experimental study (N = 272), we compared the value of apologies for restoring trust after transgressions between individuals or groups. Results revealed that both in interpersonal and intergroup contexts, apologies significantly increased trust. However, their impact was greater in interpersonal interactions (where they fully restored trust to pre-transgression levels)

than in intergroup interactions (where they failed to fully restore trust). Furthermore, the effectiveness of apology was shaped by its emotional content. Specifically, in disputes between individuals, only apologies with secondary emotions fully restored trust. Conversely, in disputes between groups, neither primary nor secondary emotions fully restored trust. This was explained by greater skepticism of apologies in intergroup contexts, particularly of those with secondary emotions. These findings underline that intergroup interactions are more competitive and distrusting than interpersonal interactions, and suggests that more extensive remedies may be required to reduce intergroup tensions.