Group apology under unstable status relations: Perceptions of insincerity hinder reconciliation and forgiveness
Nurit Shnabel, Samer Halabi and Ilanit Siman-Tov-Nachlieli

Group Processes Intergroup Relations published online 27 August 2014
DOI: 10.1177/1368430214546069

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://gpi.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/08/25/1368430214546069

Published by:

SAGE
http://www.sagepub.com

Additional services and information for Group Processes & Intergroup Relations can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://gpi.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://gpi.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://gpi.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/08/25/1368430214546069.refs.html

>> OnlineFirst Version of Record - Aug 27, 2014

What is This?
Group apology under unstable status relations: Perceptions of insincerity hinder reconciliation and forgiveness

Nurit Shnabel,1 Samer Halabi2 and Ilanit Siman-Tov-Nachlieli1

Abstract
This research examined the effects of structural conditions on perceptions of and responses to an apology offered by an advantaged majority group to a disadvantaged minority group. We used the dramatic regional changes of the Arab Spring to manipulate the instability of status relations between Israeli Arabs and Jews. In two studies, we found that under instability (vs. control), both Israeli Jews (advantaged group members; Study 1) and Israeli Arabs (disadvantaged group members; Study 2) perceived an apology offered to the Arab minority by the Israeli Prime Minister as insincere and manipulative (i.e., intended to serve the Jews rather than the Arabs). Perceived insincerity, in turn, led to reduced forgiveness and conciliatory tendencies among Israeli Arabs (Study 2). These findings shed light on how structural factors might render group apologies counterproductive in promoting positive intergroup relations. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords
group apology, group forgiveness, (in)sincerity, intergroup reconciliation, unstable status relations

During the last decades the world has entered an “age of apology,” with various groups apologizing to each other for past and present injustices (Brooks, 1999). Thus, whereas historically intergroup apologies were relatively rare because they were perceived as a sign of weakness (Mills, 2001), contemporary society has witnessed an unprecedented growth in public group apologies (Gibney, Howard-Hassmann, Coicaud, & Steiner, 2008). Despite this trend, however, the effects of group apologies on prosocial outcomes have remained relatively understudied (Blatz & Philpot, 2010). The few available studies suggest that people often respond to public group apologies with skepticism and even cynicism (Hewstone et al., 2004), and point to their relative ineffectiveness in promoting forgiveness (Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). According to Wohl, Hornsey, and Philpot (2011), group apologies are relatively ineffective because they are delivered by representatives rather than the actual wrongdoers, which interferes with communicating genuine sorrow (Tavuchis, 1991); due to the wrongdoings' excessive severity (groups...
often apologize for “unforgivable acts”; Benziman, 2009); and because of the competitiveness and mistrust that generally characterize intergroup relations (Insko, Kirchner, Pinter, Efaw, & Wildschut, 2005).

The present research points to the structural conditions under which group apologies are offered as an additional factor liable to undermine their effectiveness in restoring positive intergroup relations. Our main argument is that because apologies are ambivalent gestures, as they may represent either a “cheap talk” or a genuine readiness for structural change (Shnabel & Ullrich, 2013), the structural conditions under which an apology is offered determine the way it is interpreted. Specifically, a key distinction drawn by social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) is between stable status relations, in which the inferiority of the disadvantaged group is perceived to be immutable and certain, and unstable status relations, in which the inferiority of the disadvantaged group is perceived to be uncertain (Turner & Brown, 1978). Put differently, if the disadvantaged group can possibly become equal to, or even reverse positions with the advantaged group in terms of its status, power, or dominance, status relations are said to be unstable (e.g., Ellemers, Wilke, & van Knippenberg, 1993). As explained in detail next, we theorize that an apology offered under conditions of instability is more likely to be viewed as manipulative and insincere. That is, it will be perceived as a strategic attempt by the apologizer to reinforce existing status relations (e.g., by upstaging collective action for true change; Wohl et al., 2011). We further theorize that perceived insincerity will lead to a negative emotional response of reduced forgiveness and willingness to reconcile among members of the disadvantaged group.

(In)Stability of Status Relations and Deciphering the “True” Meaning of an Apology

Ideally, group apologies should be driven by the perpetrating groups’ experience of collective guilt and reflect an acknowledgement of moral debt to the victim group (Minow, 1998; see also Kellerman, 2006). Because the experience of collective guilt leads advantaged group members to support affirmative policies and programs intended to compensate the disadvantaged group (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003), guilt-driven apologies signal the perpetrating group’s commitment to redress the situation (Shnabel, Nadler, Canetti-Nisim, & Ullrich, 2008). In practice, however, advantaged group members are strongly motivated to avoid feeling collective guilt due to their wish to maintain a positive social identity (Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006). They might therefore use public apologies as a means to alleviate feelings of guilt for historical injustices by closing the lid on the past and sweeping the long-term implications of injustice to the disadvantaged group under the proverbial carpet (Imhoff, Wohl, & Erb, 2013). Put differently, apologies offered by leaders of advantaged groups to disadvantaged minorities may represent either genuine willingness to compensate and empower the latter and rebuild constructive relations with them, or a strategic attempt to appease them while maintaining the existing social order. We suggest that in the process of disambiguating the meaning of an apology, group members turn to the social conditions under which it has been offered.

In particular, because advantaged groups are strongly motivated to preserve their privileged position (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), advantaged group members often respond to destabilized status relations by attempting to put the resurgent disadvantaged group “back in place.” However, due to modern societies’ formal endorsement of human rights and egalitarianism (Moscovici & Pérez, 2009), advantaged groups’ motivation to preserve their privileged status tends to manifest itself in subtle, implicit and even benevolent forms, rather than in explicit, direct attempts to oppress the disadvantaged (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). To illustrate, Nadler, Harpaz-Gorodeisky, and Ben-David (2009) found that when status relations were unstable, advantaged group members granted disadvantaged group members more dependency-oriented help, namely
direct assistance that did not provide them with resources for future autonomous coping. Although providing dependency-oriented help allowed advantaged group members to perpetuate the disadvantaged group’s neediness, it nevertheless maintained a cooperative façade. Yet another illustration is that prohierarchy advantaged group members who perceived group status relations as unstable increased their support for redistributive policies (e.g., affirmative action) in an attempt to appease the disadvantaged group and restabilize the status quo (Chow, Lowery, & Hogan, 2013). Offering the disadvantaged group an apology may similarly serve as a seemingly kind way of reinforcing the status quo when status relations become destabilized. Indeed, some commentators view public apologies as token acts that take the wind out of collective action (see Wohl et al., 2011) while disavowing the advantaged group’s responsibility for present and future inequities (Blatz, Schumann, & Ross, 2009).

Based on previous findings regarding group members’ responses to the destabilization of status relations (e.g., disadvantaged groups’ unwillingness to receive dependency-oriented help under instability; Nadler & Halabi, 2006), we suggest that both advantaged and disadvantaged group members are intuitively aware of this dynamics. That is, they realize that even if advantaged group members’ behavior in response to challenges to status relations stability seems kind and benevolent, it may well be fake and inauthentic. We therefore suggest that advantaged and disadvantaged group members would tend to interpret apologies offered under instability as insincere—that is, *not* motivated by genuine experience of guilt, and a wish to undo the wrong and rebuild relations on a more equal footing. Because trust in the apology’s sincerity was found to critically determine its effectiveness (Wohl, Hornsey, & Bennett, 2012; see also Blatz & Philpot, 2010), we theorized that insincere apologies would be viewed as hollow rhetoric actually intended to disempower the recipient group and reinforce the status quo.

The dramatic changes in the Middle East due to the Arab Spring protests provided us with a unique opportunity to test the effects of instability in the context of Jewish–Arab relations in Israel. In Study 1, Israeli Jewish participants (representing the socially advantaged group; Smooha, 2005) were first reminded of the basic facts about the Arab Spring. Participants in the instability condition additionally learned that status relations between Arab and Jews in Israel were destabilized because of it. All participants were then given the information that the Israeli PM had apologized to the Arab minority for the injustice caused to it throughout the years of intergroup conflict. Participants then indicated their perceptions of the apology’s insincerity; namely, the extent to which it did not reflect the PM’s authentic feelings of remorse and genuine intention to benefit the Arabs. Study 2 replicated this experiment among Israeli Arab participants (representing the socially disadvantaged group; Smooha, 2005). Beyond indicating the apology’s insincerity, participants indicated their level of forgiveness and conciliatory tendencies towards Israeli Jews. Taken together, these studies shed light on how structural conditions can affect perceptions of and responses to public apologies and offer practical insights as to how and when such apologies should be offered to increase their positive outcomes and even more importantly, prevent them from exerting negative effects on intergroup relations.

**Study 1**

Study 1 tested our prediction that instability would lead to perceiving an apology as manipulative and insincere among Israeli Jewish participants. Using a two-cell experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to either a control or an instability condition and learned that the current Israeli Prime Minister (i.e., Benjamin Netanyahu, whose name was not explicitly mentioned in the text handed out to the participants) had apologized to the Arab minority. They then evaluated the apology’s insincerity (e.g., whether it reflected genuine empathy towards the outgroup or was actually intended to benefit their own ingroup).
Method

Participants. Forty-one Israeli Jewish students of the Tel Aviv-Yafo College (25 women, $M_{age} = 25.50$, $SD = 2.52$) participated in exchange for credit points.

Procedure. The experiment was described as a survey on “the relationship between Jews and Arabs in Israel following the Arab Spring protests.” Participants in both conditions were first exposed to the following information about the recent regional changes:

Over the past two years the Arab Spring protests have swept the Arab world, leading to dramatic changes in many Arab countries. These changes ranged from overthrowing rulers or forcing them to resign and avoid running for presidency again, through the ousting or restructuring of governments, to constitutional reforms and redistribution of resources such as food and money.

Beyond the immediate consequences, the fact that Arab citizens have shown their power may have a substantial long-term impact on the situation in the Middle East.

In the instability condition participants were exposed to the additional information that “The situation in Israel would likely be affected by these events. Assessments predict that the Arab Spring would change the power balance between Jews and Arabs in Israel in both the short and the long run.” By contrast, in the control condition the text ended without the two sentences that explicitly related the situation in the Arab world to that in Israel.

Next, participants read a short speech ostensibly made by the Israeli PM in a recent conference, in which he apologized for past injustices perpetrated against the Arab minority. The speech consisted of various elements identified in the literature as crucial for effective apologies, including expressions of remorse (de Grieff, 2008), plea for forgiveness (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008), and acknowledgement of the injustice and suffering caused to the recipient group (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012). Finally, participants completed the dependent measures.

Measures. All measures used 7-point scales (from 1 = Not at all to 7 = Very much).

Manipulation check. One item measured participants’ perceptions of structural instability (“I believe that Israeli Arabs would attain more positions of power in the state in the near future”).

Apology’s insincerity. Modeled after Wohl et al.’s (2012) measure of trust in the genuineness of apology, eight items assessed perceptions of the extent to which the apology expressed the PM’s authentic feelings and positive intentions (“I believe that the PM feels empathy for the Arabs’ predicament” (reverse coded); “I trust in the PM’s intention to promote positive relations between Arabs and Jews” (reverse coded); “I believe that the PM wishes to reconcile between Jews and Arabs” (reverse coded); “I think that the PM believes in coexistence between Jews and Arabs” (reverse coded); “I think the apology isn’t made in good faith towards the Arabs”; “I think the apology is meant to limit Arabs’ power”; “I think the apology is intended to benefit the Jews”; “I think that Arabs will benefit from this apology less than Jews,” $\alpha = .83$).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. Indicating that the experimental manipulation was successful, participants’ belief that status relations were about to change due to the Arab Spring was significantly higher in the instability ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.28$) compared to the control condition ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.82$), $t(38) = 2.21$, $p = .03$.

Apology’s insincerity. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant effect for instability, $F(1, 39) = 7.72$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .17$. As expected, participants perceived the apology as significantly more insincere in the instability ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.02$) than in the control condition ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.08$), $F(1, 39) = 9.83$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .21$.
SD = 0.82) than in the control condition, (M = 3.91, SD = 1.17).

In line with our theorizing, thus, the social conditions under which a public apology had been offered determined the way in which it was viewed, such that when status relations were unstable, advantaged group members perceived the apology as insincere and designed to manipulate the disadvantaged group.

Study 2

Study 2 aimed to extend Study 1 in two major ways. First, to extend the generalizability of our findings, Study 2 examined whether the result obtained in Study 1 would be replicated among disadvantaged group members. Advantaged and disadvantaged group members experience divergent social realities (Demoulin, Leyens, & Dovidio, 2009) and may therefore have fundamentally different perceptions of the same acts or events. It was therefore important to show that the effect of status relations instability on Israeli Arabs’ perceptions of the insincerity of an apology offered by the Israeli PM was similar to the effect obtained among Israeli Jews.

The second goal of Study 2 was to examine how perceptions of insincerity affected disadvantaged group members’ willingness to forgive and reconcile with the advantaged group following the apology. In light of the critical role sincerity is assumed to play in determining the effectiveness of public apologies (Blatz & Philpot, 2010; Wohl et al., 2012), we hypothesized that perceiving the apology as insincere would result in disadvantaged group members’ reduced willingness to reconcile and forgive the advantaged group. Notably, although Blatz and Philpot (2010) have theoretically proposed that apologies should be more effective if they are seen as sincere, they have also pointed out that there is hardly any empirical evidence to back this proposition. In fact, only one study we know of (Wohl et al., 2012, Study 2b) provides direct experimental evidence for the claim that apologies’ perceived insincerity might undermine their effects on forgiveness and reconciliation. It was therefore important for us to provide further empirical support for this hypothesized link.

We tested our hypotheses using the same design and procedure as in Study 1. Thus, after Israeli Arab participants were randomly assigned to either the control or the instability condition, they learned that the Israeli PM had apologized to the Arab minority and were asked to evaluate the apology’s insincerity. The only variation from Study 1’s procedure was that in Study 2 we additionally measured Arab participants’ readiness to reconcile with and forgive Israeli Jews.

Method

Participants. Forty-three Israeli Arab students of the University of Haifa (20 women, M_age = 24.31, SD = 5.61) participated in exchange for 20.00 NIS.

Procedure. After their random assignment to the experimental conditions (which were identical to Study 1), participants read an apology made by the Israeli PM (see Study 1). Following this, participants completed the dependent measures.

Measures. Participants filled out the same set of measures as in Study 1 (α = .82 for the eight items measuring apology’s insincerity).

Reconciliation and forgiveness. Six 7-point items (from 1 = Not at all to 7 = Very much; α = .82) assessed Israeli Arabs’ willingness to reconcile with and forgive the Israeli Jewish group. Five items were based on the reconciliation measure used by Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, and Carmi (2009; “The PM’s statement … [improves the atmosphere between Arabs and Jews in Israel/contributes to the reduction of tension between Arabs and Jews/enhances my willingness to express empathy towards Jews/improves the image of Jews in my eyes/attests to the Jews’ good intentions/makes me perceive the Jews as human beings just like the Arabs”]). One additional item (“I will never forgive the Jews for what they did to my people,” reverse coded) was adapted from forgiveness measures used
Results and Discussion

Main analysis

Manipulation check. Indicating the success of the experimental manipulation, participants’ belief that status relations were about to change due to the Arab Spring was higher in the instability (M = 4.36, SD = 1.36) compared to the control condition (M = 3.25, SD = 1.33), t(40) = 2.67, p = .01.

Next, a MANOVA revealed a significant effect for instability, F(2, 40) = 5.81, p = .006, η² = .23. In what follows are the between-subjects analyses.

Apology’s insincerity. As expected, participants perceived the apology as more insincere in the instability (M = 5.45, SD = 0.67) than in the control condition, (M = 4.60, SD = 1.03), F(1, 41) = 10.39, p = .002, η² = .20.

Reconciliation and forgiveness. As expected, participants reported significantly lower levels of reconciliation and forgiveness intentions towards the Israeli Jewish group in the instability (M = 2.91, SD = 0.65) than in the control condition (M = 3.80, SD = 1.40), F(1, 41) = 7.36, p = .01, η² = .15.

Mediation analysis. Using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2012, Model 4) we tested a simple mediation model, such that: (a) the induction of instability (independent variable) increased participants’ perception of the apology’s insincerity (mediator); and (b) perceived insincerity led to reduced forgiveness and conciliatory tendencies (dependent variable). The results, presented in Figure 1, revealed the predicted mediation (i.e., zero was not included in the 95% confidence interval, indicating a significant indirect effect).

In summary, replicating Study 1, Study 2 revealed that unstable status relations led disadvantaged group members to perceive an apology by the advantaged group leader as insincere, manipulatively designed to benefit the advantaged group. Perceptions of insincerity, in turn, had detrimental effects on disadvantaged group members’ emotional response to the apology, hindering forgiveness and reconciliation.

General Discussion

Two studies supported our theorizing that both advantaged (Study 1) and disadvantaged (Study 2) group members would perceive a public apology...
offered under conditions of unstable status relations as insincere lip service. Moreover, disadvantaged group members were found to respond to the perceived attempt to maneuver them by expressing less forgiveness and willingness to reconcile with the advantaged group (Study 2). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to identify and test the way structural factors affect perceptions of and responses to group apologies.

A word of clarification regarding the interpretation of these findings may be in order. Because we conceptualize stability of status quo as the social psychological default (e.g., MacMullen, 2011) and instability as a deviation from the default state, we attribute the effects observed in the present study to the influence of perceived instability. Yet, an alternative interpretation of our findings may be that the relative stability of status relations implied in the control condition led to heightened perceptions of sincerity and consequent greater effectiveness of the apology. We argue, however, that the two possible interpretations should be viewed as two sides of the same coin rather than as mutually exclusive, as both are consistent with our theorizing that apology is an ambivalent gesture whose disambiguation depends on the structural conditions under which it is offered: instability lends weight to the possibility that the apology is insincere, whereas stability lends weight to the possibility that it is sincere.

Theoretically, our research contributes to current social psychological understanding of the factors that moderate group apologies' success. Previous research has focused on the moderating role of the apologies’ content, such as expressions of empowerment versus acceptance (Shnabel et al., 2008, 2009), or of primary (i.e., nonuniquely human) versus secondary (i.e., uniquely human) emotions (Wohl et al., 2012). Other research has pointed to the moderating role of group members’ predispositional trust (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). Our findings extend this previous work by pointing to the role of structural conditions in determining the effectiveness of apology.

Future Research Directions

Future research should test the replicability of our findings in other contexts of unequal status relations. Specifically, the present study used the context of an intractable intergroup conflict (Bar-Tal, 2007), characterized by deep intergroup distrust. However, other contexts, such as ones in which the advantaged and disadvantaged groups share a strong common identity (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), are characterized by greater intergroup trust. It is possible that in the presence of basic trust, an apology offered under instability of status relations would not be perceived as insincere but rather as genuinely reflecting the zeitgeist’s “winds of change,” in which the disadvantaged group finally receives the respect, status, and acknowledgment it deserves. Relatedly, the credibility of the source of a given message has a critical influence on its recipients (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). It is possible that because the current Israeli PM, Benjamin Netanyahu, is perceived as hawkish and unlikely to relinquish power to the Arabs, participants tended to intuitively perceive his apology as incredible. This intuition became particularly pronounced in the instability condition, which provided “supporting evidence” to participants’ initial gut feeling regarding the apology’s insincerity. Perhaps in the case of a message source whose apology is intuitively perceived as credible (e.g., a dovish representative of the advantaged group), instability would not exert the negative effect observed in the present research. Finally, in the present study the move towards social change was initiated solely by the disadvantaged group (i.e., Arabs). However, there are contexts in which advantaged group members exhibit “solidarity-based collective action” (Becker, 2012, p. 22) and cooperate with the disadvantaged group’s efforts to promote equality. It is possible that an apology offered under instability would be perceived as more sincere if the advantaged group took an active role in initiating the social change rather than being its passive recipient.

In conclusion, the destabilization of status relations is crucial for the achievement of positive peace; namely, social arrangements that reduce
group-based injustices (Christie, Tint, Wagner, & Winter, 2008). Future research should thus identify factors that moderate and possibly reverse the direction of the effects of instability observed in the present study: hopefully, under certain circumstances instability would not impede the effectiveness of group apologies. Rather, the combination of instability and an apology by the advantaged group would serve the attainment of both justice and intergroup forgiveness.

**Funding**

The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under Grant Agreement Number 2934602 (PCIG09-GA-2011-293602).

**Note**

1. We acknowledge that a “cleaner” manipulation check of this theoretical construct would measure only the perception that status relations could possibly change due to the Arab Spring, without referring to the source of this change (i.e., whether it stems from the strengthening of the Arabs or the weakening of the Jews). Nevertheless, our manipulation check is consistent with those used in previous studies that manipulated instability (e.g., Nadler & Halabi, 2006). Moreover, the finding that participants perceived greater potential for change due to Arabs’ strengthening in the instability condition implies that perceptions of instability were successfully induced (i.e., Arabs inferiority became less certain in this condition).

**References**


