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# State Apologies and the Rehumanization of Social Groups

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## State Apologies and the Rehumanization of Social Groups

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**Abstract:** Most state apologies are qualitatively about rehumanizing the apologizer and seldom the apologized social group, such as Indigenous, immigrant or ethnic minority cohorts. That is to say, the apology generally redeems, atones and/or restores trust in the state (the apologizer). Using historical and contemporary global case studies, this study bridges insights from the literatures about apologies, and truth and reconciliation, to discern best and worst communicative practices for state apologies that aim to rehumanize the social group. In this effort, the article poses three analytical queries: (1) How are state apologies different towards a social group when the explicit goal is to rehumanize the apologized? (2) What happens to the apologizer in such apologies? (3) What can be learned by jointly considering the literature on apologies, and truth and reconciliation, on how the state can communicate an effective apology?

**Keywords:** state apologies; dehumanization and rehumanization; truth and reconciliation; Indigenous, immigrant and ethnic minority groups

### Introduction

Why do states apologize to a social group notably when they often face negative consequences for doing so? Research suggests that the function of a state apology is to rehumanize the apologizer, i.e. the state, after they have committed a transgression and have been temporarily 'Otherized' in the eyes of the victimized party and/or wider community (see e.g. Godobo-Madikizela, 2002; Marrus, 2007). In effect, by apologizing, the state as a transgressor is attempting to redeem itself while restoring their trustworthiness.

In some very rare cases, however, state apologies are employed to rehumanize the apologized by aiming to undo the damage caused by the act of dehumanizing an identifiable social group such as Indigenous, immigrant or ethnic minority cohorts. Dehumanization in this context can be understood as "denying humanness to others, introducing an asymmetry between people who have human qualities and people who are perceived as lacking these qualities" (Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015, p. 31). In these instances, the state apology serves to bring voice and communicate recognition to the grievances suffered by the apologized; even perhaps psychologically healing the aggrieved individuals and/or social group affected (see Haslam, 2006 for a systematic theoretical overview). Examples of state apologies that partially aim to rehumanize the apologized social group include Canada's apology to Chinese-Canadians for the head tax and Chinese Immigration Act (also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act), South Africa's apologies for apartheid, and apologies offered to Indigenous groups in Canada. This is not to imply that such apologies served no other purpose; in most cases they did, but they are noteworthy for their focus on the apologized.

In contrast, the majority of state apologies, e.g. Germany's role in the Holocaust, have primarily been about atonement for the nation-state. Similar to acts of ritual purification, the

apology serves to cleanse and rehumanize the state and the citizenry it represents. In these cases the grievances and lingering trauma of the victimized party often remain insufficiently addressed from a social and psychological standpoint (see e.g. Halpern & Weinstein, 2004).

This study aims to evaluate the discord between state apologies aimed at rehumanizing the apologizer instead of the apologized, and to discern best and worst communicative practices for state apologies that aim to rehumanize the social group. Using a series of historical and contemporary global case studies, the article draws from insights from the broader apologies literature that focus on how apologies function, and the literature on truth and reconciliation that looks at the process of rehumanization. The article poses three analytical queries: (1) How are state apologies different towards a social group when the explicit goal is to rehumanize the apologized? (2) What happens to the apologizer in such apologies? (3) What can be learned by jointly considering the literature on apologies, and truth and reconciliation, on how the state can communicate an effective apology?

## Framework

The conventional and popular understanding of apologies is fairly straightforward. When an individual or group commits a transgression – breaching the accepted social norms or laws of their community, the act fosters broken trust between the transgressor and the aggrieved party. In some cases, the transgressor's social standing becomes diminished in the eyes of their community, potentially to the point of being ostracized. In an effort to repair this broken trust, and restore the transgressor's reputation as a trustworthy actor, the transgressor will apologize for their past actions.

One way to conceptualize such an apology is through signaling theory. Signaling theory explains how information between different parties in cases of information asymmetry is communicated (or signalled), and how that signal is interpreted (see e.g. Connelly et al., 2011). In our context, a transgressor's apology signals their fitness to be restored to the in-group. More acutely, the apology signal two things: It is an acknowledgement of shared values and norms which the transgressor violated through prior action, and an implicit or explicit promise that the behaviour will be different in the future (see e.g. Ohtsubo et al., 2013).

The apologizer promising to do better can serve as an extremely effective signal. Implicitly, the apologizer is accepting that they will be held to a higher standard compared to those who did not apologize (see e.g. Ho 2012). A promise to do better increases the ante for the apologizer in the future, and if they transgress again they can expect to be punished more, relative to those who have not apologized. This can apply not just to the apologizer's exact transgression, but all future transgressions affecting the same group (see e.g. Wohl et al., 2011). For this reason, promises to do better can be highly risky for state institutions if they cannot guarantee that transgressions will not reoccur.

In order for an apology to be successful there is a significant degree of consensus in the literature regarding the bare minimum characteristics. As Marrus (2007, p. 79) aptly suggests, there are four key elements for an apology to be deemed complete:

1. An acknowledgement of a wrong committed, including the harm that it caused.
2. An acceptance of responsibility for having committed the wrong.
3. An expression of regret or remorse both for the harm and for having committed wrong.

4. A commitment to reparation and to not repeat the wrong.

Much of the literature on apologies builds upon these four essential characteristics. For example, Diers-Lawson and Pang (2016) suggests an ethical apology framework (EAF) that could be used to categorize apologies as ethical or not. The EAF includes all four of the aforementioned components of a complete apology, but also proposes that for an apology to be ethical it must be delivered early, evolve over time to reflect changes in the situation, be consistent across sources and contexts, listen to those affected, and expressly seek forgiveness.

Research in political science has emphasized the dangers that state apologies can play on the domestic political situation. According to Mihai (2013), discussing the state's past injustices can be particularly concerning for those individuals who strongly identify with their nationality. These individuals are likely to object to the state apologizing, and their criticism can often undermine the effectiveness of the apology in the eyes of the victimized community. Wohl's (2013) study reinforces this idea. He finds that in the aftermath of a state apology the victimized community tends to expect better treatment from the dominant community. For this very reason, Mihai (2013, p. 203) suggests that broadening popular support for an apology is crucial for its democratic legitimacy and effectiveness – simply put, "the more support for the apology, the more legitimate the apology".

Ho (2012) provides a way to frame these principles through an economic taxonomy of apologies, where the apology's efficacy is measured by the cost associated with it. Namely, the costlier the signal the more effective it is likely to be. Such tangible cost apologies are those that include either some type of material restitution, or expose the transgressor to potential material liability. These apologies can include monetary reparations to the victims of past transgressions. This is a common practice for most state apologies. Sometimes, monetary reparations can comprise of funds spent on community wide social projects such as those devoted to educating the public about a past transgression. Tangible costs can further include the potential for exposing the apologizer to legal liability to lawsuit. In effect, the apology can be viewed as an admittance of wrongdoing and could be used by the apologizer to seek financial compensation in court.

All full apologies contain some element of status loss. Apologizing is an admittance of fault that an action performed was incorrect. There is a range to this behaviour: someone voluntarily lowering themselves by admitting to "being such an idiot" or statements of a similar nature, represents a greater loss of status than merely apologizing. Chaudry and Loewenstein (2019) suggests that there is a warmth-competence trade off. In effect, apologies increase perceptions of warmth, but decrease perceptions of competence. This loss of status can prove to be a costly signal especially for those groups who tend to put a premium on status. State apologies can therefore represent a loss of national status, impacting those who have strong affinities with their nationality.

Weak apologies, in contrast, are those that do not contain a cost associated with them. Instead the apologizer makes excuses for the transgression, most commonly by shifting blame onto external circumstances. In the process the apologizer avoids associated penalties.

Partial apologies are a type of weak apology in which empathy is expressed for the victimized party, but the transgressor does not accept responsibility. In other words, partial apologies are less effective. For instance, phrases such as "I am sorry you are upset by what I did" or "I am sorry you feel that way". These partial apologies can come across as shifting responsibility onto the victimized party for their negative reaction to the transgressor's action.

In the next section, this framework is used to analyze a series of historical and contemporary global case studies of state apologies. The cases oscillate between state apologies that focus on the interests of the apologizer (the state), to those that aim to rehumanize the apologized (the social group). Of particular interest is the interaction of state apologies and the varying truth and reconciliation practices in South Africa and Canada that sought to rehumanize the apologized social group, with varying degrees of success.

## Case Studies

### *Germany and the Holocaust*

No conversation on state apologies would be sufficiently complete without at least some discussion of German apologies for the Holocaust committed during the Second World War. As Marrus (2007, p. 88) aptly states “... one can hardly speak of the role of guilt and national obligation, and the consequent collective atonement, compensation, memorization, commemoration, reparation and healing, without thinking of the great impact of Holocaust motifs and reparative programs”. This process was not solely contained to Germany, but rather occurred in nearly all territories that had some connection with the decimation of the European Jewish population. It even extends beyond nation-states, with churches and corporations engaged in the process of atonement for their complicity in the Holocaust. However, qualitatively the majority of Holocaust apologies – even amongst nation-states that were complicit in doing little to assist European Jewish refugees – exist somewhere between those that are focused on restoring the transgressor to trustworthiness and those intending to rehumanize the apologizer. In particular, this becomes evident upon examining one of the most famous state apologies: Willy Brandt’s *Kniefall*.

On December 7, 1970 West German Chancellor Willy Brandt while visiting Warsaw, fell to his knees in front of the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, remaining completely still on the wet floor for over half a minute (Borneman, 2005). This apology – known thereafter in German as *Kniefall* – is notable for several reasons. Most significantly, it was the first time a German leader had so explicitly admitted responsibility and guilt for Jewish and Polish suffering during World War Two. It is this recognition that Germany now shared social norms with their victims, norms that the Nazis had abhorrently violated, which makes this apology about more than just restoring the state’s trustworthiness. Nevertheless, as Borneman (2005, p. 62) contends, this apology was primarily an act that was necessary as a “symbolic purification ritual” to transform Germany from a “criminal nation to a rehabilitated member of the international community”. Put differently, it was a necessary action to restore the state to a position of trust.

Brandt’s *Kniefall* provides additional insights into state apologies that are important to consider. One of the most unique aspect about Brandt’s apology is that it was entirely unspoken. It thus does not fully comprise the aforementioned four necessary elements of a complete apology, at least explicitly. Nevertheless, it has been recognized as a highly effective apology that helped to restore Germany’s relations with the Nazi regime’s former victims, particularly Poland and wider Eastern Europe. Here a signalling taxonomy is informative. While Brandt’s apology was silent, it did implicitly contain the costly signal of status loss. Kneeling by its very nature reduces an individual’s status in the eyes of those witnessing them. Moreover, the reaction of some German conservatives at home, who questioned Brandt’s patriotism, and whether he should have knelt at all, signalled that Brandt paid a price for his actions.

Brandt's apology provides evidence for the role that the individual representative can have in making an intergroup apology effective. In this case, Brandt's apology carried a particular sense of sincerity and conviction, considering he had spent much of life actively resisting the Nazi regime, often at substantial risk to his own safety (Borneman, 2005). It is entirely possible that such an apology would have been far less effective if Brandt had been someone else.

### *South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*

South Africa represents, perhaps, the most informative case study on the process of rehumanization, apologizing, reconciliation, and peace building in the wake of severe and prolonged injustice from a policy of apartheid (1948-1994). This policy ensured that South Africa's various ethnic groups would be dominated politically, economically and socially by a small white population. With the end of apartheid in the early 1990s, one of the most pertinent questions was how to move forward. What was the best way to heal the grievous wounds of the past in a way that allowed for a new democratic, peaceful, multi-ethnic South Africa?

The choice was made to embark on an approach of restorative justice in the form of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This process invited victims who were recognized as having undergone gross human rights violations to supply statements about their experiences. The perpetrators of these acts were also able to give testimony and request amnesty from both criminal and civil prosecution for politically motivated crimes. It was through this process that the architects of the TRC hoped to heal the deep wounds of the past and rehumanize non-white ethnic groups those who had suffered under apartheid (see e.g. Vora & Vora, 2004). Despite good intentions, the actual successes of the TRC are far more muddled, with examples of both deep failures and some successes. The remainder of this section will examine the apology offered by South African President F.W. de Klerk, followed by a discussion of the general architecture of the TRC and its results.

One of the worst days of the TRC occurred when de Klerk apologized to the victims of apartheid on behalf of the National Party. Speaking to the TRC in 1997, de Klerk, responding to assertions expressing the contrary, insisted that he had previously apologized for apartheid and offered this statement:

Let me place once and for all a renewed apology on record. Apartheid was wrong. I apologize in my capacity as leader of the National Party to the millions of South Africans who suffered the wrenching disruption of forced removals in respect of their homes, businesses, and land. Who over the years suffered the shame of being arrested for past law offences. Who over the decades and indeed centuries suffered the indignities and humiliation of racial discrimination. Who for a long time were prevented from exercising their full democratic rights in the land of their birth. Who were unable to achieve their full potential because of job reservation. And who in any other way suffered as a result of discriminatory legislation and policies. This renewed apology is offered in a spirit of true repentance, in full knowledge of the tremendous harm that apartheid has done to millions of South Africans.

On the face of it, this apology was profound and sincere, and it should have satisfied even the most exacting of standards. However, during follow up questioning by TRC staff and commissioners de Klerk undermined his apology so abominably that the African National Congress issued a statement rejecting it with contempt. Through the entirety of the follow up he

persistently denied any knowledge or responsibility for the prevalence of severe mistreatment and torture committed by state agents, especially against anti-apartheid activists. While de Klerk claimed to regret the murder, torture, rape and abduction of anti-apartheid activists, he did not apologize for them as he believed that he, and by extension the National Party government, was not responsible. De Klerk failed to commit to, and was vague in discussing any “practical” or material amends to the victims of apartheid. Put another way, de Klerk was unwilling to use costly signals, and instead offered a partial apology that did not take responsibility for these heinous transgressions.

Additionally, unlike Brandt, whose personal story lent sincerity to his apology, de Klerk had been a member of the National Party since 1972 and had long been a strong proponent of apartheid. These factors made his apology seem insincere at best, and very far from a spirit of true repentance. Seemingly, de Klerk wanted to rehumanize himself and the National Party, but did not attempt to rehumanize the victims of apartheid.

De Klerk’s apology was also undermined since his mandate to speak on behalf of the National Party was extremely dubious. As Govier and Verwoerd (2002, p. 78) note, “Members of the older (pretransition) party such as former South African President P. W. Botha were not present and had not authorized de Klerk to speak for them. Botha publicly criticized some of de Klerk’s statements, immediately revealing that his mandate as a spokesperson was questionable”. While serving as a particularly stark example, this reflects a common difficulty in state apologies. Intergroup apologies are complicated since groups contain numerous autonomous agents who are capable of acting in distinct ways, even actively opposing the apology or the group receiving the apology. This can, unsurprisingly, serve to compromise the apology in the eyes of the recipient group and raise questions about how committed to reconciliation the perpetrating group truly is.

The TRC itself had noble intentions and evidence suggests that South Africans, especially the Xhosa, found it was successful in establishing the truth of what happened, an important aspect of rehumanization. Moreover, for some individual members of the TRC, the process proved cathartic and helped to provide psychological healing (see e.g. Avruch, 2010). Nonetheless, this was by no means a universal experience. Many found that re-opening the wounds of the past caused further psychological damage (see e.g. Vora & Vora, 2004). This was especially problematic since there was a substantial lack of support and mental health resources available to the victims who testified – a common problem in most TRCs (see e.g. Cilliers et al., 2016).

The general consensus is that the TRC was not successful at achieving intergroup reconciliation between white and non-white ethnic groups in South Africa, although interpersonal reconciliation was achieved for some individuals. Several explanations can be offered to explain this failure. The simplest explanation is that reconciliation is hard and can take generations to occur and as such, it is no surprise the TRC was unsuccessful at achieving it. Chapman (2007) criticized the TRC for trying to reduce intergroup reconciliation between white and non-white ethnic groups to the interpersonal, and suggests that significantly more attention needed to be paid to the state institutions (e.g. police force) behind apartheid. More broadly, Afrikaan-South Africans were fairly unsupportive of the TRC and its outcomes. A notable flashpoint in this regard was imbedding amnesty inside the TRC: the cost for perpetrators to apologize was significantly lowered, potentially reducing the efficacy of their apologies.

Costly signaling theory can help illuminate what Tavuchis (1991) termed the paradox of apologies. Apologies need to be costly in order to rehumanize the apologizer. An apology made with a benefit to the apologizer (e.g. amnesty) effectively lowers the cost of the apology. It



makes the apology less credible and effective. While the function of a state apology can be to rehumanize the apologizer, an apologizer that appears to be motivated by restoring the apologizer's status is likely to fail. An effective state apology has to be solely focused on the victim. State apologies with a focus on rehumanizing the apologized actor is more beneficial for the apologizer as well. Such examples of state apologies are explored next.

### *Canada and Indigenous Residential Schools*

On June 11, 2008, then Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized to the victims of residential schools. Residential schooling in Canada has a long and tragic history, beginning in the early 1600s with the opening of the first boarding schools. It was not until the Indian Act of 1877, which made Indigenous peoples wards of the state and the Canadian federal government responsible for their education, that the residential system truly took effect. From 1867 to 1983, nearly one-third of all Indigenous children, approximately 150,000 in total, were taken from their families and communities and sent to residential schools funded by the state (Anderson, 2012). These schools were devised to sever the connection of Indigenous children from their cultural identity and traditional practices, which were considered inferior to those of European settlers, and to educate them in "civilized ways". This has become epitomized in Canadian discourse by the phrase "killing the Indian in the child". Beyond the significant damage caused by removing children from their families and denying them access to their languages and cultural practices, students often experienced physical and sexual abuse. Claes and Clifton (1998, p. 24) note that "brutal and arbitrary punishment was a daily feature of school life; public beatings and humiliations, head shaving, and being kept in locked closets on bread and water for days". Many of the students who graduated from residential schools had trouble reintegrating into their own communities, and yet, continued to be victimized by the prevalent prejudicial attitudes in white Canadian society. In effect, they existed in limbo, trapped between two worlds, yet fitting into neither.

The impact of this system continues to reverberate throughout Canada's Indigenous communities, with research suggesting that it perpetuates higher rates of alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, mental illness, and suicide amongst Indigenous people in Canada (see Bombay et al., 2014). While complaints and allegations were made, the voices of those who suffered were neither heard nor accepted until the 1990s Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP). The government of the day, led by Prime Minister Jean Chretien responded to RCAP on January 7, 1998 with an announcement of an Indigenous action plan and the reading of a statement of reconciliation by Minister Jane Stewart. According to Anderson (2012, p. 573) many Indigenous-Canadians found this response entirely insufficient: "... the healing fund did not include all survivors, the statement's language was fairly general, but perhaps most importantly, the symbolism of the event indicated the government was not taking the issue seriously". In particular, Prime Minister Chretien himself was not the one to offer the apology, nor did he attend the lunchtime ceremony where Stewart, a junior Minister, read it out. This action can be easily understood as one that is trying to restore the state to trustworthiness rather than rehumanizing the victims. Nearly a decade later, the Government of Canada, under Prime Minister Harper, took a very different approach in addressing the legacy of residential schooling in Canada.

In 2006, the government announced the approval of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), which included five components: (1) the Common Experience



Payment (CEP); (2) the Independent Assessment Process (IAP); (3) a Truth and Reconciliation Commission; (4) commemoration; and, (5) health and healing services. Under the CEP, the IRSSA was to provide CAD 1.9 billion (~USD 1.4 billion) to former living members of recognized residential schools; this was intended to holistically address the experiences of attending residential schooling (Government of Canada, 2019). The IAP on the other hand was a claimant based, out-of-court process that addressed specific claims of sexual abuse, serious physical abuse, and other psychologically damaging acts suffered at Indian Residential Schools. By 2021, CAD 3.2 billion (~USD 2.4 billion) has been paid out through IAPs; the process itself cost another CAD 411 million (~USD 310 million) (CBC News, 2021).

The actual apology was offered in the Canadian Parliament, and the tone and substance of the apology was directly informed by letters from Indigenous groups such as the Assembly of First Nations, and through meetings with survivors of residential schools. This can be understood as an important communicative process to give voice to the grievances of those who suffered, by directly allowing them to have influence in the tenor of the apology. Further, the Harper government “found” a loophole that allowed Indigenous leaders to directly respond to the apology in the Canadian Parliament, instead at a press conference as the government originally planned.

Harper’s communicative strategy was effusive. The apology praised the strength of Indigenous communities, and apologizing profoundly for the government’s role in the residential school system, as well as the damage it caused and continues to cause, to Indigenous communities. He directly referenced how the TRC was an “opportunity to educate all Canadians on the Indian residential schools’ system” (CTV News, 2008). This is important, as misconceptions about residential schools were widespread in Canadian society, and many in Canada, prior to Harper’s apology, questioned the need for Canada to apologize at all (see e.g. Gray, 2011). By shining a light on the suffering experienced by survivors of IRS and giving Indigenous peoples a platform to respond, Harper sought to build a bridge of empathy amongst the Canadian public and Indigenous people.

The state apology contains all four of the elements Marrus (2007) identified as being necessary for a complete apology. There was a tangible cost with substantive IRSSA funding. In addition, while not expressly promising to not repeat the act, Harper implicitly did so through indicative comments such as: “There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian residential schools’ system to ever again prevail” (Canadian Press, 2008). It could be reasonably inferred that Harper experienced some status loss through apologizing. For instance, he praised political rival and ideological opposite, Jack Layton, leader of the New Democrat Party, for having spent the last year and a half persuading him to apologize. Praising a rival leader in this manner caught many in the Canadian media by shock (see e.g. Anderson, 2012).

The Harper government’s state apology, in combination with the TRC, sought to rehumanize the Indigenous population in Canada. Albeit, these efforts were also undertaken, in part, out of a desire to restore trust between the Canadian government and Indigenous peoples. The outcomes of this process, more than a decade and a half later, is debateable.

In principle, the TRC was intended to provide a platform for the victims of IRS to speak their truth, with the aim to psychologically heal the trauma experienced. Similar to most TRCs, this was conducted through interpersonal story telling, with little focus placed on how the IRS system fit into the broader colonial framework, or the state institutions that contributed to IRS, and continue to negatively impact the lives of Indigenous people. The TRC failed to spark meaningful debate amongst the general public since it did not adequately consider that the same

systems originally responsible for creating the IRS continue to impact contemporary Indigenous-Canadian relationships in almost every respect, including: child welfare, criminal justice, health and human services, resource extraction and sanitation. Further undermining Canada’s TRC process was that, in contrast to the South African TRC, the Canadian commission lacked the mandate to subpoena witnesses, offer amnesty in exchange for honest testimony or name perpetrators. This led to an abundance of story telling by former residential students, limiting the scope for an empathetic connection between perpetrators and victims, or for the perpetrators to apologize and ask for forgiveness.

Finally, while both Harper’s apology and the TRC had good intentions, and contributed to rehumanize some individuals, it succumbed to one of the biggest pitfalls in state apologizing. State apologies are not a magic wand that can rectify ongoing transgressions. When states attempt to move forward, promises to do better only work in the eyes of the apologized, if, and only if, the apologizer meaningfully improves their conduct. Few Indigenous people in Canada would say this has come to pass in light of continuous and serious injustices perpetrated against them (perceived or real) by Canadian state institutions. These include, but are by no means limited to: a failure to fully implement the recommendations of the TRC; disproportionate rates of violence committed against Indigenous women and girls; the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system; the failure of the treaty process at the provincial levels (e.g. British Columbia); and, the pervasive prejudicial attitudes and actions against Indigenous peoples throughout Canada.

### *Canada and the Chinese Head Tax, and Chinese Immigration Act*

Since the 1980s, the Chinese-Canadian community have actively sought an apology and material compensation from the Canadian state, for the Chinese Head Tax (1885-1923), and the Chinese Immigration Act (1923-1947). These legislations not only disrupted families and hurt Chinese-Canadian economically, they also conveyed a status of ethnic undesirability (see e.g. Winter, 2008). A procession of Liberal and Conservative led governments, announced their intent to create a memorial fund that would apprise all Canadians of the injustice that had been perpetrated. The caveat, however, was that they would not apologize.

In 2006, Prime Minister Stephen Harper ultimately apologized on behalf of the Canadian government to all Chinese-Canadians. Harper’s apology was quite comprehensive and sought to specifically rehumanize the Chinese-Canadian community. This was accomplished in twofold. First, Harper’s apology discussed the suffering that the community experienced, and praised the important role the victims of these policies played in constructing Canada. He went as far as to say that the back-breaking labour Chinese immigrants provided in the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway “helped to ensure the future of Canada” (Globe and Mail, 2006). Additionally, Harper stressed the invaluable role Chinese-Canadians continue to play in Canada. In effect, this helped to shift the narrative concerning Chinese-Canadians from that of an undesirable immigrant group to a crucial and valued part of Canadian society.

Harper’s state apology included a material component with payments of CAD 20,000 (~USD 15,093) offered to the few remaining survivors (or spouses) of the Head Tax, and CAD 34 million (~USD 25.7 million) for recognition projects, with CAD 10 million (~USD 7.6 million) earmarked towards educating Canadians about the discrimination and hardship faced by the Chinese-Canadians due to wartime measures and/or immigration restrictions. Harper’s apology also contained a commitment to improved state conduct, stating that the “government will

continually strive to ensure that similar unjust practices are never allowed to happen again” (Globe and Mail, 2006).

Polling conducted following Harper’s state apology found an overall positive response, but with some important caveats. Blatz et al. (2009) in their survey of both Chinese-Canadians and non-Chinese-Canadians found both groups reported significant satisfaction with the state apology, although Chinese-Canadians evaluated it somewhat less favourably. Both groups assessed the Canadian government, and Canadians of European heritage, more favourably after the apology, but the apology had no effect on the participants’ perceptions of Chinese-Canadians. In addition, Chinese-Canadian participants generally possessed greater skepticism toward the motivations behind the apology and were more inclined to view it as a ploy to secure Chinese-Canadian votes in the subsequent election (see e.g. Li 2008). Chinese-Canadian participants were more inclined to believe that negative effects ensuing from the Head Tax on the Chinese-Canadian community persisted. Wohl et al. (2011, p. 86) in their research on intergroup apologies – including the Head Tax – found that “the historically victimized group often waits to see if the apology produces behavioural change after granting forgiveness”. In the case of Harper’s apology, they found that among Chinese-Canadians the apology increased expectations that it would “lead to conciliatory discourse and behaviours”. In a reevaluation, one year later, they found that “Chinese-Canadians who assigned collective guilt were less likely to think that the apology had transpired into actual change”. Nonetheless, while not achieving perfect results, Harper’s state apology was still highly effective in helping to heal the lingering wounds caused by Canada’s past anti-Chinese immigration policies.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The failure of most state apologies can be attributed to the reluctance of the apologizing parties to pay a real cost for their past actions, and an insufficient focus on the rehumanization of the victimized party. When considering state apologies that are effective, the more effective state apologies are those that are costly to fake. If the apologizer is sacrificing something to apologize, the aggrieved party is more likely to believe the apologizer is being genuine. Ultimately, a state apology that does not have a tangible guarantee to do better, will be seen to be insincere and leaves open the possibility that the state will commit future transgressions.

De Klerk’s apology, while acknowledging what he perceived to be the main violations, did not acknowledge a number of other violations that the victims of apartheid were seeking an apology for. In his responses to questions from the TRC, de Klerk failed to engage with the idea of reparations, which are an important means of making things better for the victims. He further failed to expressly promise that these types of policies would not occur in the future. While he did acknowledge that the apartheid policy was a failure, he nevertheless did not discuss the prejudicial systems of belief among white South Africans that allowed it to occur. Moreover, de Klerk frequently engaged in partial apologies behaviour, patently demonstrating that he was unwilling to take responsibility for the human rights violations and violence that was committed by the Nationalist Party.

Harper’s apology to Indigenous peoples contained almost all of important elements for a successful state apology. He clearly identified what the violation was and the impact it had on residential school survivors and Indigenous communities more broadly. He discussed steps that were being taken to heal what had happened, including the formation of the TRC. He further offered assurances that this would not happen again, stating “there is no place in Canada for the

attitudes that inspired the Indian residential schools’ system to ever again prevail” (CTV News, 2008) While Harper did spend significant time admitting that there was a moral failure on the part of the Canadian government and public institutions, for some, his explanations of why the policy occurred did not go far enough (see e.g. Coulthard, 2014). Although, Harper acknowledged that the IRS system was rooted in prejudicial logic that saw Indigenous peoples and cultures as inferior, he did not discuss how it was only one component of a broader colonial project that sought to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands.

The most effective state apology was the one offered to the Chinese-Canadian community. Here, Harper clearly identified that the state’s past failure to acknowledge the Chinese Head Tax and the Chinese Immigration Act were violations. Not only did he promise to establish an education fund to help make things better, at the end of his speech he stressed that this would not happen again, stating that “our deep sorrow over the racist actions of our past will nourish our unwavering commitment to build a better future for all Canadians” (Globe and Mail, 2006). Lastly, he clearly identified that this policy was a moral failure on behalf of the government, and that it was rooted in a prejudicial bias against Chinese people, and he did not make excuses for these policies.

Apologizing effectively is a costly process. It often includes material restitutions, as well as the risks associated with promising to do better, when there is no guarantee this will be the case. As evident in Harper’s apology to Indigenous peoples, even when the state apology is costly, it can still fail to achieve reconciliation or healing if the apologized social group continues to suffer transgressions.

There is also an inherent paradox to state apologies: while they only work if they are costly, an effective state apology that restores the transgressor to good standing effectively lowers the cost, making it easier to apologize. Put another way, if the apologizer is more trusted by the apologized, the necessary costliness for a signal to be effective is lowered.

The lesson here is that the focus should be on rehumanizing the apologized social group, and not the apologizer. Any state apology too focused on the apologizer is seen as self-serving and therefore, less costly and less believable. A state apology focused on rehumanizing the apologized is therefore, paradoxically, more effective at rehumanizing the apologizer as well.

For state apologies that aim to rehumanize the aggrieved party, the apologizer must tangibly pay for their transgressions. This can come in a variety of forms including: a loss of status for the apologizer, some form of tangible cost and/or a promise to do better in the future. For politicians, any state apology, but especially one that includes material reparations, can be risky. It may lead to criticism by groups in society who are opposed to the offering of apologies, as was the case for Brandt’s apology. Furthermore, promises to do better can often backfire especially considering politicians cannot control the policy of future governments, or the attitudes of their citizens, and these groups can transgress again which will break the trust of the victimized group.

There is no easy apology, the apologizer will need to experience discomfort. It is by being willing to experience this discomfort that they demonstrate their worthiness, and that the state apology is more than just “cheap talk”. It is through their discomfort that they signal to others that they have changed, that the expectations of behaviour have changed, and that the apologized group deserves to be treated better and will be treated better in the future. If they are unwilling to pay the price, as it were, and instead offer a weak or partial apology, it signals a lack of sincerity, and that nothing has, in fact, changed. If they make the focus of the apology about themselves, rather than the apologized social group, then they weaken the signal. For states who are planning

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to apologize it is important to be ready to accept the cost. Suffice it to say, offering a non-costly apology can be worse than offering no apology at all.

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