

RESEARCH ARTICLE

These Are Not Just Words: A Cross-National Comparative Study of the Content of Political Apologies

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Countries around the world increasingly try to redress past human rights violations by offering apologies. The debates surrounding many of these political apologies suggest they do not necessarily satisfy victims' needs. Little is known, however, about the actual content of these apologies and the extent to which they include the elements that are often seen as essential to healing processes. In this exploratory study, we conducted a cross-national comparative analysis of the texts of political apologies ($N = 203$, offered by 50 countries) and coded whether they included a statement of sorry, apology, or regret (IFID), and an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, acceptance of responsibility, promise of non-repetition, promise of reparations, recognition of victim suffering, victim re-inclusion, victim praise, or a recognition of moral values/norms. We found that the majority of political apologies only include a selection of these elements, with some countries offering more comprehensive apologies than others. Most apologies, however, do contain an IFID, an acknowledgment of wrongdoing and a recognition of suffering, although there is variation in how this is expressed. This variation can be linked to the receiving group (i.e., within-country or not), the contentiousness of the apology in a country and – albeit weakly – the cultural context. Based on these findings, we suggest that when considering the impact of political apologies, it is crucial to consider quantity (how many apology components are included) as well as quality (how this is done).

Keywords: political apologies; cross-national; database; text analysis; victim needs

'Was it enough merely to say "sorry" on the part of those who had the humility, courage and honesty to say "sorry"? And what of those who are perhaps too arrogant to utter this simple word?'¹ In his speech at the commemoration of the Rwandan genocide in April 2004, South African President Mbeki questions the relevance of offering an apology when such a heinous crime has happened. After himself apologizing for South Africa's passivity and highlighting the inaction of the international community during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, he continues to wonder if uttering this simple word is actually enough. In doing so, he seems to exemplify the 'paradoxical qualities' (Tavuchis, 1991: 5) that are often attributed to political apologies: they cannot undo or 'unstate' what has been done, but they are also often seen as extremely meaningful in healing processes, including those that take place at the national and international level.

According to some scholars, we live in an 'age of apology' (Brooks, 1999; Gibney et al., 2008), a time in which countries are increasingly being called upon to take responsibility for past wrongdoings and to redress these wrongs by offering apologies. Particularly since the end of the Cold War, numerous apologies have been offered

by states and state representatives all over the world for various human rights violations (Zoodma & Schaafsma, in press). Although such statements of regret may appear trivial in the wake of gross human rights violations, it has been argued that they can be important and powerful as they offer an acknowledgment of the human worth and dignity of the victims and may help establish a sense of common moral ground, which in turn may promote trust (Andrieu, 2009; Govier & Verwoerd, 2002). From this perspective, political apologies contain a transformative power that is crucial for victims and societies at large to come to terms with the past.

In recent decades, several key works have appeared detailing what elements political apologies should contain to realize their transformative potential (e.g., Lazare, 2004; Tavuchis, 1991). Drawing from research on interpersonal apologies, researchers have identified six central components that make up a 'good' or 'complete' apology: in addition to an expression of 'sorry' or 'apologize' (which is also defined as a so-called illocutionary force indicating device or IFID, as it is an expression of the sender's attitudes or emotions, e.g., Searle & Vanderveken, 1985), they should also contain an explicit acknowledgement of the wrongdoing, an acceptance of responsibility, a recognition of victim suffering, a promise of non-repetition, and offers of repair (e.g., Lazare, 2004). Nevertheless, it is not evident that official apologies for human rights violations contain all these elements. Political apologies are much more complex than interpersonal apologies and have the potential to generate

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considerable controversy. One complicating factor is that they are often requested for events that occurred in the distant past, which may make it more difficult for current governments to fully admit responsibility for what happened, or to do so in a manner that conveys sincerity. Adding to the complexity is that in national and international political arenas, apologies can also be a face threatening act that is considered to be humiliating for the country or the leaders involved. This has also been linked to different cultural norms and expectations about what apologies mean and how they should be expressed (e.g., Dundes Renteln, 2008).

Thus, there is reason to believe that political apologies for human rights violations do not necessarily meet all the requirements of apologies as presently defined in the literature. So far, however, there has been no systematic analysis of the political apologies that have been offered across the world. Much of our current thinking in this regard stems from studies that have compared a fairly small number of apologies across a few countries (e.g., Blatz et al., 2009; Bobowik et al., 2017) or that have focused on how people respond to imagined scenarios in which apologies are offered (e.g., Kirchhoff & Čehajić-Clancy, 2014). Although these studies have yielded valuable insights about how people respond to apologetic discourse after a transgression, we still know little about whether the apologies that have been offered so far actually address victim needs. To what extent do they include the elements that are often seen as essential to healing processes? Are there universal patterns in this regard or does this vary across countries? What might explain these differences? The aim of this paper is to address these questions. We do so by relying on a cross-national database of apologies that have been offered across the world. This paper is a first, exploratory analysis of this rich dataset, designed to increase our understanding of what is actually said in such statements and to gain more insight into the potential of political apologies to positively contribute to national and international reconciliation processes across the world.

Political Apologies and Victim Needs

An apology can broadly be defined as a verbal or non-verbal gesture designed to advance reconciliation between two parties in response to a transgression (Tavuchis, 1991). Each party involved in the apology event can consist of one person – such as in interpersonal apologies – or of multiple persons, as is the case in intergroup or collective apologies. A political apology, intergroup by nature, has been defined as an expression or statement ‘given by a representative of a state, corporation, or other organized group to victims, or descendants of victims, for injustices committed by the group’s officials or members’ (Thompson, 2008: 31). The focus of this paper is on verbal political apologies, offered by a state or state representative to a collective for human rights violations that have happened in the recent or distant past.

That political apologies are rising across the world raises the question of whether there is a common understanding about the form or content of these apologies. This is reflected somewhat in the academic literature, where social psychologists and scholars of transitional justice have identified the central components that are deemed essential to comprehensive political apologies and to

their acceptance by society at large. We noted above that scholars have identified six central components of ‘good’ or acceptable apologies, based largely on the literature on interpersonal and group-based apologies (e.g., Blatz et al., 2009; Lazare, 2004; Wohl, Hornsey, & Philpot, 2011). There is some suggestion, however, that political apologies may contain a more extensive array of elements. For example, Blatz and colleagues (2009) examined the content of 13 political apologies that had been given in the English language for past injustices. Their analysis showed that the above mentioned six elements could be found in the majority of these apologies, but that several additional elements were present across the sample of statements. These elements included dissociation from the system, praise for the victims, and praise of the current system. Augoustinos and colleagues (2011) noted similar expressions in their in-depth discursive analysis of Australian Prime Minister Rudd’s apology to the Aboriginal Stolen Generations of Australia in 2008. These included, among other things, a recognition of victim suffering, a condemnation of the failure to apologize, and a rhetorical aim to re-include the victims into a collective national identity.

Political apologies are considered one form of a restorative response after historical injustice against victim groups (e.g., Barkan, 2000; Wohl et al., 2011), and it is therefore important to consider in what way the content of apologies might matter to victims. For example, they may have lost not just the tangible, physical reality of home and land, life and loved ones, but also the psychological experience of a sense of agency and control over their life and their future. According to the needs-based model of reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015), the restoration of this loss of agency and control is essential to victims. Similarly, Kachanoff and colleagues (2020) have identified three basic but universal psychological needs in their unified model of collective victimization. These needs are relatedness (feeling related to and accepted by others), competency (a sense of competency and agency), and autonomy (freedom to determine own culture and identity). Kachanoff and colleagues argue that all three needs must be addressed for healing processes to begin.

The different elements of political apologies may address these various victim needs. Acknowledgement of and taking responsibility for the wrongdoing may satisfy the need for agency because they mark an end to a period of silence or denial of the transgression and signify a new beginning (e.g., Wohl et al., 2011). Elements that focus on victims’ re-inclusion in society may address their need for relatedness, and this may be especially relevant to Indigenous peoples who have endured decades or even centuries of segregation and discrimination at the hands of the state (e.g., Augoustinos et al., 2011). Similarly, when political apologies praise victims for their achievements and recognize them as citizens bearing their country’s heritage and national pride, their value is recognized. In some cases, political apologies are also accompanied by non-verbal gestures of remorse (e.g., bowing the head) as a way of returning ‘face’ and honor to victims, which may be particularly relevant in some cultural contexts (e.g., Hornsey et al., 2019).

In some cases too, victims of human rights violations may express a specific need in response to the process of atonement and redress. For example, for many victims of

genocide, an essential need is the explicit acknowledgement of the harm perpetrated against them (e.g., Vollhardt & Twali, 2020). Apologies may address this need when the term ‘genocide’ is explicitly used to describe the transgressions (as opposed to euphemisms such as ‘tragedy’ or ‘lives lost’). Additionally, when state representatives promise that the transgression will never be repeated, this can be an affirmation of a connection between the victim group and the wider society. Finally, the promise of practical amends can be an important yet contentious element of political apologies (Brooks, 1999; Govier & Verwoerd, 2002). For some victims, the offer of reparations in the form of financial compensation is proof of the sincerity of the apology. Other victims, however, may reject such offers they view as an attempt to preserve the structural victimization status quo (Howard-Hassmann, 2012).

Political Apologies across Countries

Although much academic work on political apologies to date has discussed how they might address a number of important victim needs, countries may not always include the various elements that are seen as essential in this regard – leading to pain and frustration among victims and their descendants. A case in point is the apologies Japan has made over the last decades, which do not seem to have satisfied the needs and wishes of the intended recipients (e.g., Yamazaki, 2006). For example, a 2013 opinion poll found that 98 percent of South Korean and 78 percent of Chinese respondents felt that Japan had not properly apologized for its wartime actions. Yet, in Japan the pattern was reversed. Only 28 percent of the Japanese participants believed that their government had not sufficiently apologized – while 48 percent thought that it had, and 15 percent did not think an apology was even necessary (Chun, 2015). Remarkably, the political apologies offered by Germany for WWII-related crimes – an obvious comparison to its former Axis ally – has generated far less controversy among the country’s neighbors (e.g., Lind, 2008).

It has been argued that this dissatisfaction among recipients of political apologies may be related to the ambiguous language that is sometimes used. For example, in the opening address at the Stockholm Holocaust Conference in 2000, the Swedish Prime Minister Persson stated that the Swedish government ‘deeply regrets’ that ‘Swedish authorities failed in the performance of their duty during the Second World War’. Researchers have pointed out that this level of implicitness may be problematic in the public and highly mediated statements that political apologies are, as it may lead to questions about their sincerity. For this reason, they have argued that political apologies should contain an explicit apology, with an explicit acknowledgement of wrongdoing and an explicit acceptance of responsibility, to be perceived as valid and remorseful. It has been hypothesized that in the absence thereof, political apologies have the potential to actually reignite or fuel animosities rather than reduce them (e.g., Chun, 2015; Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Lind, 2008).

Yet, for various reasons, offering an explicit apology for past mistakes may not be easy for countries. For example, governments may be concerned about any liabilities or judicial claims that may be derived from their statements (MacLachlan, 2015). Such concerns regarding reparation

demands might lead governments to refrain from accepting explicit responsibility for the wrongdoing, or to use ‘we regret’ instead of ‘we apologize’ (Boehme, 2020). Scholars have argued that debates about reparations have complicated and delayed apologies from Germany regarding the Herero genocide in Namibia, leading to ‘half apologies’ (Boehme, 2020: 245) with ‘legally savvy grammar and language’ (Bentley, 2014: 637).

On a more symbolic level, countries may also be reluctant to offer a full and unconditional apology for past transgressions because it is perceived as a face-threatening and perhaps even humiliating act, which has the potential to negatively impact their public image and symbolic power (e.g., Kampf, 2009). This may motivate governments to use more ambiguous or evasive language in the apology or to show limited concern for the suffering or needs of the victim group. Some authors have argued that this is particularly the case for nations with a ‘proud tradition of self-regard’. Such countries are likely to be more motivated to ignore or rationalize past transgressions than to explicitly acknowledge them and repent of them, as this could be interpreted as a sign of weakness (Chun, 2015; Lind, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991).

Political apologies must also satisfy a broad audience and should not only appeal to victims but also to the majority group within society, or possibly even the broader international community (e.g., Ohtsubo et al., 2020). On the one hand, scholars have praised this as one of the hallmarks of political apologies, as their account of the past cannot be one-sided but should unlock the door to a process of open dialogue and mutual understanding (Andrieu, 2009; Barkan & Karn, 2006). At the same time, contentious issues come into play when a political apology is offered and there may be a large part of society opposing it. In her elaborate study of political apologies offered by Japan and Germany, Lind (2008) particularly notices this tendency in Japan where most instances of contrition have sparked domestic controversy and resulted in denials and justification of past wrongdoings. Such domestic backlash to political apologies is not uncommon, however, and has occurred in countries such as the United States, France, United Kingdom, and Australia as well. This risk of backlash may make governments particularly careful in the words that they choose (e.g., Andrieu, 2009; Payne, 2008).

What may also play a role in this regard are cultural expectations as to how and when apologies should be used and expressed. For example, face-negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998) proposes that people from more collectivistic and face-valuing settings are more likely to use indirect, mutual face-saving conflict styles (such as apologies) to maintain or restore relationships than in more individualistic settings. Such conflict strategies may also be used in ‘honor-sensitive’ societies with demanding hierarchical social structures that tend to put high value on social rules and norms, and the loss of face and honor that might come with the breaking of these rules (e.g., Eaton, 2014; Tavuchis, 1991). Nevertheless, there is also evidence that in more collectivistic settings, people make stronger distinctions between ingroups and outgroups (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and are particularly concerned about maintaining harmonious relationships with ingroup members. This could imply that

they are less likely to apologize for transgressions that have taken place at the intergroup level (or between-country apologies) or rely on more implicit or ambiguous language when offering apologies in such a situation as a means to save face.

Much of the current thinking on this topic, however, stems from single country case studies (e.g., Chun, 2015; Kampf, 2009) or on studies comparing a small number of apologies. What is lacking, is a systematic investigation of real political apologies that have been offered by different countries for human rights violations. In what follows, we investigate to what extent political apologies from across the world actually contain the essential elements for a so-called 'good' or 'transformative' apology, how this is expressed and how comprehensive these apologies are, and whether or not this varies across countries. With this, we aim to shed more light on the contextual factors that may influence the content of political apologies that have been offered across the world.

Method

Data collection

We created the Political Apologies Database, which contains 329 apologies (until 2019) that have been offered by 74 countries across the world for human rights violations. For this, we relied on existing databases (the Political Apologies and Reparations Website, created by Howard-Hassmann, and the Political Apologies Archive), extensive literature and media searches, and systematic online searches in multiple languages (English, Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, French, and Spanish). For a more elaborate description of the search procedures that were used, see Zoodsma & Schaafsma (in press). We relied on a broad definition of what a political apology is, so we included statements containing words such as 'sorry' or 'apologize', expressions of regret or remorse, or requests for forgiveness. We also included statements with an expression of guilt or shame if they also included an explicit or implicit acknowledgement of responsibility or wrongdoing, or a recognition of the suffering and trauma among victim groups. We only included political apologies offered in the context of or related to transgressions that would fall under the UN classification of human rights violations (UNCHR, 1993). During our search procedure, we did not limit the time frame of the date of the apologies nor that of transgressions for which they were offered.

Of the 329 apologies in our database, we were able to obtain the full texts of 203 apologies, via online search queries, but also by contacting victim organizations, governments, and archival institutions. In some cases, we obtained the apology text through academic sources. We collected the original language version of all the texts that we could find plus, if necessary, an English translation. Texts that were not available in English (44) were translated (except for a few apologies in Dutch, German, and French) so that they could be coded in a language that the members of the research team would understand. The translation of these texts obviously runs the risk of losing some of the delicacies in the wording of the original language and we therefore instructed our translators to leave comments or discuss alternative translations whenever they deemed necessary.

Data coding

For our content analysis, we developed a coding scheme based on *code families* (Campbell et al., 2013), which consisted of primary codes that were sometimes accompanied by secondary codes. These code families were based on the apology elements that are most often mentioned in the literature: (1) an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, (2) an acceptance of responsibility, (3) a statement of sorry or apology, or expression of regret or remorse, (4) a request for forgiveness, (5) expressions of concern for the victim group(s) (i.e., an acknowledgment of victim suffering, victim reinclusion, and victim praise), (6) a promise of non-repetition, (7) offers of reparations, and (8) a recognition of moral values or norms (e.g., through the recognition of human rights or the rule of law).²

The primary code families 1, 2, and 3 also included secondary codes to capture the explicit/implicit expression of these apology elements. The IFID was coded as explicit if the words 'sorry' or 'apology' were used in the text, whereas expressions of remorse or regret or related terms were coded as implicit (e.g., 'express remorse/regret', 'offer condolences'). The acknowledgement of wrongdoing was coded as explicit if a clear reference was made to the human rights violations (e.g., 'people were killed and imprisoned without due trial', 'children were taken away from their homes') and as implicit when this reference was more evasive or ambiguous (e.g., 'tragedy', 'the crimes that happened'). Acknowledgment of responsibility was coded as explicit if this was done directly (e.g., 'we accept responsibility', 'we are responsible') and as implicit if this was expressed as an intention (e.g., 'we ought to take responsibility', 'we should take responsibility').

The apology texts were divided among four coders who independently examined and coded each text. Considering the heterogeneous nature of the data we worked with, we chose to take a tailored approach of *intercoder agreement* rather than *intercoder reliability* (Campbell et al., 2013). Our main concern for this was that a more strict (quantitative) approach to our content analysis would make it more difficult to identify the nuances and differences in the texts. Intercoder agreement requires a process of two or more coders who reconcile any coding discrepancies they may have for the same text (or section of text) through discussion. Thus, each of these four coders was also randomly assigned a subset to 'second code'. This process was followed by joint discussion over discrepancies, and adjustments were made to the coding if necessary. The PI conducted a final review of the full data-set, and 20% of these data were checked by an external blinded second coder. Any remaining discrepancies were discussed and resolved.

Data descriptive statistics

The 203 political apologies in our text database have been offered by 50 different countries – whereby the former German Democratic Republic and (unified) Germany are counted as separate countries, as well as the former USSR and the Russian Republic. **Table 1** shows that a substantial part of these apologies has been offered by Japan, Germany, the USA, and Canada. It is important to note that on six occasions, Japan reused

Table 1: Sample Descriptive Statistics.

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> Length	Medium		Recipients		
			Verbal	Written	Within	Between	Transnational
Argentina	1	714	1	0	1	0	0
Armenia	1	767	1	0	1	0	0
Australia [†]	5	878.4	4	1	5	0	0
Austria*	3	1976	3	0	0	2	1
Belgium	1	945	1	0	0	0	1
Brazil	1	770	1	0	0	0	1
Canada [†]	15	1389.93	14	1	14	0	1
Chile	1	2601	1	0	1	0	0
Colombia	2	2844	2	0	2	0	0
Croatia [†]	2	1339	2	0	0	2	0
Czechia	1	1067	0	1	0	1	0
Denmark	3	1078.33	2	1	1	1	1
Ecuador	1	332	1	0	1	0	0
El Salvador	3	1612.33	3	0	3	0	0
Ethiopia [†]	1	4920	1	0	1	0	0
Germany*	22	1343.77	16	6	1	19	2
Finland	2	995	2	0	1	0	1
France	1	1045	1	0	0	0	1
Germ. Dem. Rep.	2	357.5	0	2	0	1	1
India [†]	1	1255	1	0	1	0	0
Ireland [†]	4	1502.75	4	0	4	0	0
Israel	1	1493	1	0	0	1	0
Jamaica [†]	1	785	1	0	1	0	0
Japan*	45	549.71	27	18	2	18	25
Kenya [†]	1	1125	1	0	1	0	0
Latvia	1	514	1	0	0	1	0
Lithuania [†]	1	2402	1	0	0	1	0
Luxembourg	1	233	0	1	0	0	1
Nepal	1	230	1	0	1	0	0
Netherlands**	8	742.38	6	2	2	4	2
New Zealand [†]	10	718.8	8	2	9	1	0
Norway*	6	1078.33	5	1	6	0	0
Pakistan [†]	1	1030	0	1	0	1	0
Peru	1	458	0	1	1	0	0
Poland*	2	1253.5	2	0	1	0	1
Portugal	2	1029.5	2	0	0	1	1
Rep. of Korea	4	1153.5	4	0	4	0	0
Russ. Federation	1	803	0	1	0	1	0
Serbia	1	664	0	1	0	1	0
Sierra Leone [†]	1	577	1	0	1	0	0
South Africa [†]	1	1182	1	0	0	1	0
Sri Lanka [†]	1	2127	1	0	1	0	0
Sweden [†]	1	965	1	0	0	0	1
Switzerland	3	1186	3	0	2	0	1
Taiwan	2	1390.5	2	0	2	0	0
Turkey	1	689	0	1	0	1	0
UK [†]	10	815	9	1	3	2	5
USA [†]	20	681.35	6	14	15	5	0
USSR	1	216	0	1	0	1	0
Yemen	1	412	1	0	1	0	0
Total	203		146	57	90	66	47

Apologies were either translated into English or we found a (official) translation online. The length of the text is based on the word count of the English version. *N* = number of texts. [†] Apology originally offered in English. * One apology originally offered in English. ** Four apologies originally offered in English.

(parts of) the same apology.³ A somewhat smaller but still substantial portion of our database consists of apologies offered by Australia, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Republic of Korea, and the United Kingdom. We also found multiple apologies by countries such as Croatia, Colombia, El Salvador, and Taiwan.

The political apologies in our database are related to a broad range of transgressions, such as a (civil) war (World War II in particular) or a protracted conflict, the maltreatment of indigenous or minority groups (e.g., the Roma in Norway, Japanese or Chinese inhabitants in the United States and Canada), or violence during or in the aftermath of colonial rule. Our text database chronologically starts with an apology by Pakistan in 1974, as this was the first apology in the Political Apologies Database of which we were able to obtain the full text. For the purposes of this analysis, we focused on the apologies offered until December 2019. Most apologies have been offered by a state to a group within their country (within-country apologies: 90) but a substantial part has been offered to a group in another country (between-country apologies: 66) or has been targeted at multiple countries or groups that belong to multiple countries (transnational apologies: 47).

The majority of the apologies (146) have been offered verbally (e.g., in a public speech, during a commemoration) and a smaller portion has been offered in a written statement, a resolution, or law. There are some cross-country differences in this regard, in that a relatively large part of the Japan and US apologies have been offered in writing. On average, the verbal apologies are longer ($M = 1070.44$, $SD = 842.54$) than the written apologies ($M = 729$, $SD = 625.13$), $t(136.99) = 3.15$, $p = 0.002$.

Results

Apology Elements across Countries

In a first set of analyses, we looked at which apology elements are included in the apologies and how this is done, and whether there are cross-country similarities and differences in this regard.

Apology and remorse. **Figure 1** gives an overview of the extent to which the different components are present in the apologies offered by the countries in our database. Given the selection criteria that we used, most of the full-text apologies in our database include an IFID. The majority of these apologies (134) contain an explicit apology statement (e.g., 'We are sorry', 'We offer this apology'), often accompanied by qualifiers that communicate honesty and depth (e.g., 'a full and sincere apology', 'our heartfelt apology', 'honest apology', 'profound apology', 'our deepest apologies', 'we wholeheartedly apologize', 'we are truly sorry'). A substantial part of the apologies (71) contained more implicit apology statements such as expressions of regret or remorse, which are frequently preceded by qualifiers as well to communicate the heartfelt nature of the apology (e.g., deep remorse, profound regret). Countries sometimes also add emphasis to these words (e.g., 'we are sorry') by repeating them several times, and this may also be an attempt to convey sincerity (as did, for example, Taiwan in the 2016 apology for the maltreatment of

indigenous peoples, Australia in the 2008 apology to the so-called Stolen Generations, and El Salvador in the 2011 apology for the massacre in El Mozote).

A smaller number of apologies contain requests for forgiveness.⁴ In the literature, such requests are often seen as a means to reverse power roles between victims and perpetrators, whereby the dignity of the former is restored and the latter are rendered powerless and weak. Our analysis of the texts in our database shows that countries may also try to evoke such an image through explicit statements ('I stand humbly before you', 'I want to solemnly and humbly apologize') or by referring to nonverbal displays of submission. For example, in the footsteps of German Chancellor Brandt's famous kneefall, various German leaders have stated in their apologies that they bow before the victims ('I bow to you', 'I can only bow my head in shame'), particularly during speeches or commemorations where victims or their descendants were present. Similar expressions have, however, been used in apologies by Switzerland (for the country's refusal to accept refugees during World War II), Lithuania, Croatia, and Austria (for their role in the Holocaust), India (for the 1984 Sikh massacre), Poland (for the anti-Semitic purge in 1968), Serbia (for war crimes committed in Vukovar in 1991), Belgium (for the country's inaction during the Rwandan genocide), Japan (for its role in World War II), Portugal (for the persecution of Jews during the Inquisition and in its aftermath), and Colombia (for the El Salado massacre in 2000).

By and large, there do not seem to be considerable cross-country differences in the words that are used to apologize. Rather, there is variation in how often they are used. For example, elements of submissiveness and requests for forgiveness can more often be found in German apologies (or, more broadly, in apologies for the Holocaust), whereas Japan tends to rely on implicit apologies, through the expression of remorse, regret, or sorrow, or by offering condolences. Such implicit expressions have, however, also been used by other countries, and seem to be more common in statements about events or periods that have been relatively contentious within a country (e.g., colonialism), or that are targeted at a different country or a broader, transnational audience (e.g., apologies for slave trade). For example, Dutch Crown Prince Willem-Alexander expressed 'remorse' and UK Prime Minister Blair expressed 'deep sorrow' over the slave trade (in 2002 and 2006, respectively). In 2019, UK Prime Minister May conveyed 'deep regret' for the Amritsar massacre, and similarly in 2005, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs Bot expressed 'profound regret' for military violence in 1947 in Indonesia.

Acknowledgment of wrongdoing and responsibility. Virtually all apologies of which we were able to obtain the full text contain an acknowledgment of (part of) the wrongdoings committed by the country (with the notable exception of Turkey for its statement on the Armenian genocide, and some apologies by Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United Kingdom). A more in-depth analysis of the various statements, however, shows that there is some variation in how elaborate or explicit these acknowledgments are. For example, a substantial number (137) of

	N	IFID	Forgiv.	Ackn.	Respon.	Non-rep.	Repar.	V_Praise	V_Reincl.	V_Suf.	Values	Index
Argentina	1	100		100				100	100		100	0.50
Armenia	1	100		100				100	100		100	0.60
Australia	5	100		100	20	80	20	40	80	100	60	0.59
Austria	3	100	33	100	67	33	33	67	67	67	67	0.62
Belgium	1	100		100				100	100	100	100	0.60
Brazil	1	100		100				100	100	100		0.50
Canada	15	93	13	100	27	47	20	93	80	67	53	0.55
Chile	1	100		100				100	100	100	100	0.60
Colombia	2	100	50	100		50	100	50	100	100		0.64
Croatia	2	100	50	100					100	50	100	0.50
Czechia	1	100		100					100	100	100	0.50
Denmark	3	100		100	33	33		33	67	100	67	0.52
Ecuador	1	100		100		100	100	100	100	100	100	0.80
El Salvador	3	100	33	100	67	100	100	33	33	67	100	0.72
Ethiopia	1		100	100		100		100	100	100	100	0.70
Finland	2	100		100	50	100	50		50	100	50	0.59
France	1			100		100			100	100	100	0.50
Ger. Dem. Rep.	2		100	100	100		50		50	100	50	0.54
Germany	22	59	36	100	59	41		73	91	73	68	0.53
India	1	100	100	100		100		100	100	100	100	0.80
Ireland	4	100		100	25	50	50	100	50	100	75	0.64
Israel	1	100		100					100	100		0.40
Jamaica	1	100		100		100	100	100	100	100	100	0.80
Japan	45	96		84	13	51	16	16	44	80	29	0.33
Kenya	1	100	100	100			100		100	100	100	0.70
Latvia	1	100		100				100				0.30
Lithuania	1	100	100	100				100	100	100	100	0.70
Luxembourg	1	100		100	100					100		0.40
Nepal	1	100		100							100	0.30
Netherlands	8	100		100	13	25	50	13	63	63	25	0.43
New Zealand	10	100		100			40	70	50	80	30	0.45
Norway	6	100		100	50		33	50	50	67	83	0.51
Pakistan	1	100		100					100			0.30
Peru	1	100		100				100			100	0.40
Poland	2	100	100	100	50	50		50	50	100	100	0.69
Portugal	2	100	50	100	50	50		50		50	100	0.54
Rep. of Korea	4	100		100	25	25	100	100	100	75	100	0.72
Rus. Fed.	1	100		100				100	100		100	0.50
Serbia	1	100		100		100			100	100	100	0.60
Sierra Leone	1	100	100	100				100	100		100	0.60
South Africa	1	100		100		100		100	100	100		0.60
Sri Lanka	1	100		100			100	100	100	100		0.60
Sweden	1	100		100	100							0.30
Switzerland	3	100		100		33				67	33	0.33
Taiwan	2	100		100	50	100	100	50	100	100	100	0.79
Turkey	1	100		100					100	100		0.30
UK	10	90		80	10	10	30	70	60	80	20	0.43
USA	20	100		100	10	35	25	45	35	60	90	0.45
USSR	1	100		100	100							0.30
Yemen	1	100		100	100	100			100		100	0.60

Figure 1: Apology Components across Countries (in Percentages of Number of Apologies per Country) and Comprehensiveness Index.

the apologies in our database include references to specific transgressions or descriptions of the nature of and reasons for people's suffering (e.g., forced labor, unjust imprisonment, torture). These are often accompanied by a condemnation of those actions (e.g., 'The United States government did something that was wrong – deeply, profoundly, morally wrong') or a reaffirmation of the moral standards (e.g., 'It was an outrage to our commitment to the integrity and equality for all our citizens').

In the majority of the apologies that Japan has offered for the annexation of Korea, the Sino-Japanese wars or World War II, the acknowledgment of past wrongdoing

seems to be more implicit. In these apologies (26 in total), reference is either made in very general terms to the harm that was done (e.g., 'colonial rule', 'aggression'), or more indirect language is used to describe the past transgressions (e.g., 'damage', 'actions in a certain period in the past', 'difficult period', 'incident', 'errors', 'the great mistake') or the victims ('the issue of comfort women').

Although Japan appears to stand out in this regard, other countries too have been reluctant to explicitly acknowledge atrocities committed in the distant or recent past, and have used similar avoidance strategies. For example, in the 2011 Dutch apology for the Rawagede

massacre in Indonesia, reference is made to a ‘tragedy’ and ‘an extraordinary difficult episode’, during which people ‘lost their lives’. In the apology delivered by Taiwan in 1995 for the violent suppression of the anti-government uprising in 1947, this is referred to as ‘the incident’. Likewise, in the Serbian Declaration regarding Srebrenica in 2010, the Srebrenica genocide is described as a ‘tragedy’ and a ‘crime committed against the Bosniak population’. There are also a few examples where countries try to shift (part of) the blame, as is evident in the UK apology for the abuses at the hands of the colonial administration during the Mau Mau revolution (‘During the Emergency Period widespread violence was committed by both sides’). In addition, countries sometimes point to the suffering of their own group (e.g., ‘Because there are missing persons among both Serbs and Croats, people killed from both Serbia and Croatia’) or try to justify their wrongdoings (as happened in the 1995 Swiss apology for the country’s refusal to accept Jewish refugees in World War II). This justification or shifting of blame happens in only a relatively small number of cases, however.

Figure 1 shows that some countries explicitly *accept* their responsibility for past wrongdoings as well (e.g., ‘The responsibility that we bear for these crimes’) or point to their moral, historical, or political responsibility in redressing these wrongs (‘And we will bear the responsibility that our history imposes upon us’). This can be observed in German apologies in particular, although countries as diverse as Austria, Canada, Australia, France, Japan, Norway, El Salvador, and Taiwan have made explicit statements about their nation’s responsibility for past atrocities as well. Nevertheless, this acceptance of responsibility occurs much less often than the acknowledgment of wrongdoing.

Offers for reparation and promises of non-repetition. Whereas most apologies contain some form of acknowledgment of past wrongdoing, a meaningfully smaller number (78 in total) contains a promise of non-repetition. Such promises have been made by Japan and Germany – often accompanied by statements about their peaceful intentions – but they have also been made by post-authoritarian countries (e.g., El Salvador, Colombia), and in apologies to indigenous populations (e.g., Australia, Canada, Taiwan). Although many countries will try to mark a break with the past in their apology, they more often seem to do so by emphasizing their commitment to moral standards or to the rule of law (112 apologies). Apologies also do not seem to be a platform for countries to offer material compensation for victims. We found such offers in only 49 of the apologies in our database, and these were primarily within-country apologies.

Concern with victim needs. Our analysis revealed that countries tend to use comparable strategies to display their concern with the victims’ needs. For example, **Figure 1** shows that in most of the apologies in our database (149), countries recognize the suffering of the victims. They often do this in rather general terms (particularly in written statements, when mention is made of the ‘suffering’ or the ‘hardship’ caused). They may, however, also do so by trying to display compassion and care,

particularly in speeches where victims are present (e.g., ‘No power on Earth can give you back the lives lost, the pain suffered, the years of internal torment and anguish’, ‘You are Irish citizens who have been greatly hurt and wounded by the past experiences inflicted on you’). In some cases, countries recognize that the apology cannot erase the pain or the past (‘Whereas an apology for centuries of brutal dehumanization and injustices cannot erase the past’), although apologies are frequently presented as a turning point and the beginning of a healing process for the victims and the country as well (‘So, let us together, as a nation, allow this apology to begin to heal this pain’).

Across a wide range of apologies, we also find that countries try to reinclude the victims or place them on an equal footing. This is often done by emphasizing their friendship with them (‘I want to thank all of our indigenous friends’), by referring to the similarities and the ties that bind them together, and by expressing a desire to cooperate with them (e.g., ‘to build a future-oriented relationship based on reconciliation as well as good-neighborly and friendly cooperation’). The Japanese apologies in particular tend to include statements that communicate a willingness to build new and peaceful relationships.

To a lesser extent, countries praise the victims in their apologies. There are various ways in which they do this. For example, countries may emphasize the victims’ contributions to society (e.g., ‘[...] the Acadian people, through the vitality of their community, have made a remarkable contribution to Canadian society for almost 400 years’). They may also praise their courage or dignity (e.g., ‘I commend to your resolve and your courage in facing your painful past’) or their moral or cultural values (e.g., ‘[...] today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history’). Furthermore, they may present the victims as a source of admiration or inspiration (e.g., ‘Therefore, sisters and brothers, who are present here, comrades who are present even without being here, mothers, grandmothers, kids: thank you for the example of your fight’). In some cases, countries also stress the innocence or peaceful intentions of the victims (‘Many innocent Jeju civilians were sacrificed’).

Overall, it seems that attempts to restore the victims’ identity are used more often in within-country apologies. Canada, in particular, uses such elements, although Germany (which has primarily offered between-country or transnational apologies) has often praised the courage and dignity of victims in their apologies as well.

Comprehensiveness of Apologies across Countries

In a second set of analyses, we looked at cross-country differences and similarities in the level of comprehensiveness of the apologies that were offered. For this, we calculated the proportion of features in each apology and created a mean score per country, weighted against the number of apologies of that country in our database. The resulting index can be found in **Figure 1**.

The index shows that the apologies offered by several Latin American countries (e.g., Colombia, El Salvador, Ecuador) as well as some Asian countries (Taiwan, the Republic of Korea) contain relatively many apology

elements, followed by countries such as Australia, Finland, and Ireland. What these countries have in common is that a substantial part of their apologies has been offered to groups within the country. Canada and Germany occupy a midrange position, together with New Zealand and many Western and Northern European countries such as the UK, the Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, France, and Denmark. Compared to other countries that have offered relatively many apologies such as Germany and Canada, the apologies that Japan has offered are meaningfully less comprehensive.

We also explored whether variation in the level of comprehensiveness can be explained by country-level characteristics and apology characteristics. We did so only tentatively, given the nature of the data and the unequal number of observations per country. Because of the nested structure of the data, we conducted multilevel regression analyses, using the program HLM. In these analyses, we included countries that had offered two apologies or more (22 countries in total). In light of our finding that the content of apologies may depend on whether the intended recipients are from within the country or from another country, we included the receiving group (within-country, between-country, transnational) at the apology level. Based on the idea that variation in how apologies are expressed may reflect the value tendencies in a country as well (more individualistic or collectivistic, and with a stronger or weaker preference for social hierarchy), we also added scores that capture these values. For this, we relied on the Hofstede individualism and power distance indices, but we are aware of the validity issues surrounding these scores. We were not, however, able to obtain alternative scores (e.g., Minkov, 2018) for all the countries in our sample. At the country level, we controlled for the number of apologies offered by countries and at the apology level, we controlled for the medium used (verbal or written).

We used a forward-stepping approach whereby we first included the receiving group (dummy-coded, with within-country recipients as the reference group) at level 1 (uncentered) and added medium (dummy-coded and uncentered) in a second step. This analysis revealed that both between-country and transnational apologies are less comprehensive than within-country apologies ($\beta = -.03$, $t = -2.23$, $p = 0.037$ and $\beta = -0.06$, $t = -4.78$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Type of medium used for the apology (verbal or written) was not significant at the 0.05 level ($\beta = 0.05$, $t = 2.02$, $p = 0.057$) so we removed this variable from the model.

We then added the collectivism-individualism and power-distance scores (grand mean centered) at the country level, controlling for the number of apologies offered by each country. A larger number of apologies offered by a country was associated with lower overall comprehensiveness scores for these apologies ($\beta = -0.002$, $t = -2.73$, $p = 0.036$). We found, however, no main effects for the individualism index or the power distance index (t s < -1.329 , p s > 0.20). The country-level power distance scores did moderate the between-country recipients slopes: countries that are higher on power distance score tend to offer

less comprehensive between-group apologies ($\beta = -0.002$, $t = -2.69$, $p = 0.008$), be it that this difference is very small. No such moderating effects were found for the individualism index. For the transnational apologies, no moderating effects of the individualism and power distance scores were found (p s > 0.48).

Discussion

The findings from this first analysis of our rich dataset of texts from multiple nations and spanning several decades has provided us with initial but valuable insights into what is actually said in the political apologies that have been offered across the world, and whether they include components that are generally seen as important for apologies to realize their transformative potential and satisfy victims' needs.

In the literature, it is often assumed that political apologies should at least include an IFID, an explicit acknowledgment of the wrongdoing, an acceptance of responsibility, an acknowledgment of suffering, a promise of non-repetition, and offers of reparation. Our analysis, however, shows that the vast majority of political apologies that have been offered so far only include a selection of these elements, with some countries offering apologies that are more comprehensive than others. This level of comprehensiveness varies as a function of the receiving group. Our findings suggest that countries are more likely to include more essential apology elements in their statements when the receiving group resides within the country's borders than with apologies that are offered between country or transnationally. This difference seems to be somewhat more pronounced for countries that are higher on power distance, possibly because they may be more motivated to save face in their relations with other countries. It is important to note, however, that our findings in this regard should be interpreted with care because of the validity concerns about the index that we used and the relatively small and unequal number of observations per country. We were also not able to establish relationships between the individualism score of a country and the comprehensiveness of the apologies they offer, be it that we did find that a country such as Japan – generally considered higher on collectivism – ranks lower on our comprehensiveness index than countries such as Germany or Canada, generally considered higher on individualism.

There does, however, seem to be a 'baseline' template that countries worldwide use when publicly addressing wrongdoings from the recent or distant past. We found that, in addition to the presence of an IFID (which was part of our selection criteria), most of the political apologies in our database do include an acknowledgment of wrongdoing and – to a somewhat lesser extent – an acknowledgment of victim suffering. There seem to be qualitative differences, however, in how these elements are included. For example, Japan – which has offered the largest number of apologies in our database – seems to frequently use implicit language to either express the apology or describe and acknowledge the past wrongdoings. This choice may reflect a desire to 'save face', particularly in an intergroup (between-country) context (44 out

of the 45 apologies that Japan has offered are between-country or transnational apologies), although it may also reflect cultural or linguistic conventions (e.g., Yamazaki, 2006). Nevertheless, we see that other countries rely on more implicit language as well, particularly when addressing transgressions that are more contentious. In such cases, governments and their leaders may be more concerned with how the apology will be received by their domestic audience. These more implicit statements can, however, be considered very problematic by the intended recipients, who may question their sincerity.

What happens much less often in political apologies is that countries explicitly accept responsibility for past injustices. This reluctance may have to do with the fact that many governments or government representatives were not in office when the human rights violations occurred. Arguments such as 'we cannot judge history fairly against the standards of the present' (Barkan & Karn, 2006: 6) may also be used to avoid accepting responsibility. It is notable as well that reparations or material compensation for the victim group, which are often seen as the logical consequence of an acceptance of responsibility, were offered in less than a quarter of the political apologies. Explicit statements of non-repetition are less common as well, and countries seem to be more likely to stress their commitment to shared values instead. This may be an alternative way to reassure victims that the transgression will not happen again, and an attempt to promote faith in the country's future intentions as well.

Where countries also seem to vary is in how explicitly they address victim needs. Although across the entire set of apologies, there seems to be an emphasis on recognizing the victims' suffering and pain, countries vary in whether and how they try to restore the dignity of victims. To some extent, this restoration of dignity is evident when state representatives ask for forgiveness on behalf of their country or communicate submissiveness and humility in their apology, in what has been described as an exchange of humiliation and power (Lazare, 2004). Whether countries rely on such discursive strategies seems to mainly reflect the scale of the human rights violations, such as is the case in apologies for the Holocaust, where a concession is made that words are insufficient to capture the magnitude of the suffering. Submissiveness in speech towards victims may also be done following a change in regime or in post-authoritarian eras. Apologies given in this regard may be a symbolic move of breaking with the past to mark a transition or to communicate a political theme for the new governing era ('from the old way to a new, peaceful one'). At the same time, it is also important to note that it is unclear whether expressions of submissiveness and breaking with the past are sufficient to address victim needs. Some victims may feel that symbolically closing the book on the past with an apology is also a realistic closing of the subject and with that, any further discussion or on matters of retributive justice or reparations.

Still other ways that apologies address victims is with language that praises them and that rhetorically re-includes them in society. This can be viewed as an attempt to recognize victims as citizens being given their rightful

place of good standing in society. Similarly, praise for the victims – with a focus on a restoration of their dignity and honor – may also be an attempt to address their need for empowerment and agency (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015). That this was more prevalent in apologies in within-country contexts or in the German apologies for the Holocaust, might be telling of the level of suffering and humiliation that these victims endured. Praise and restoration of honor can thus take on the role of 're-humanizing' those who were de-humanized.

Obviously, it is not clear from our analysis how these different apology elements affect people's responses to political apologies. Intended receivers of apologies may choose to reject an apology if they deem it insufficient or insincere, and this plays an important role in validating the various forms that political apologies can take. We did find that countries employ various 'strategies' to convey sincerity by adding qualifiers (e.g., sincerely, humbly) to their words of remorse, as well as a focus on the past and ongoing suffering of victims because of past injustice. Nevertheless, the ritualistic aspect of apologies, as well as their specific form may be just as crucial for the victims to assess their sincerity (e.g., Horelt, 2019). This includes the factors and motives that lead to an apology, the logistics and manner in which it is given, and the follow-up actions that are taken. Similarly, non-verbal aspects of apologies may play a crucial role in conveying a sense of remorse, accounting for wrongs, and seeking atonement. Related to this is the role of emotive words in conveying sincerity, shame, or sorrow in political apologies, which may be important for victims evaluating apologies on authenticity (e.g., Bobowik et al., 2017). Further research would benefit from examining how people respond to the subtle – and at times, not so subtle – nuances of these different aspects and elements of apologies.

Although there are limitations to a study that only contains a textual analysis and does not include the perspectives of victims as well as non-victims, this paper is important because it is the first to systematically examine and compare the content of political apologies across the world. Heated debates often emerge in countries when political apologies are offered – particularly concerning the wording and phrasing of these statements – and we think that our analysis of the elements that are included in apologies may help in gaining a better understanding of why some apologies are more controversial than others. More specifically, our findings suggest that – when evaluating the so-called 'age of apology' and the impact of apologies on victims – it is crucial to not only look at how many elements are included (quantity), but to also take into consideration how these elements are expressed and how forthcoming and explicit countries are when recognizing past wrongdoings (quality), as this not only differs across situations and countries but is also particularly likely to affect the extent to which apologies actually address victims' needs. Future research can build upon these findings by examining in more depth and detail the nuances in the language and rhetorical strategies that are used in political apologies, as well as the contextual factors that have an impact on their content and comprehensiveness

and how this affects victims' as well as non-victims' reactions to the apologies.

Data Accessibility Statement

The Political Apologies database including all of the original and translated texts will be made available online at www.politicalapologies.com.

Notes

- ¹ Speech at commemoration of the Rwandan genocide, 7 April 2004, <http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/2004/mbek0407.htm>.
- ² We also coded the apologies on a range of other dimensions (e.g., pronouns used, active or passive forms, emotions, praise of own group), that we have not included for the purpose of the present analyses. Further information about these codes is available from the authors upon request.
- ³ This concerns the apologies offered by Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi in 2002 and 2003 and the apologies made by the Japanese emperor in 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2019.
- ⁴ It is important to note here that in some languages, statements of apology and requests for forgiveness overlap. This is exemplified in the Spanish 'pide perdón' and Portuguese 'peço perdão' which is often translated as 'apologize', but literally means 'asking forgiveness'. When coding whether these apologies contained a statement of apology or sorry or a request for forgiveness, we relied on the translated version of the text.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they do not have any conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship of this manuscript. The second and third authors served as action editors on the Special Issue to which this manuscript was submitted. They, therefore, did not play a role in the editing and review process of this manuscript.

Author Contributions

The first three authors were involved in the data search and coding process, the analyses, and the writing of the manuscript. The fourth author also contributed to the coding process and took part in the conceptual discussions about the manuscript.

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