


## ARTICLE

# Meaningless gestures or pathway to healing and reconciliation? Comparing the perspectives on political apologies in victim and non-victim communities in El Salvador, the Republic of Korea and the United Kingdom

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## Abstract

Political apologies have been theorized to play an important role in healing and reconciliation processes in post-conflict settings. Whether they actually fulfil this function, however, remains unclear as the voices and perspectives of victim communities have largely been underrepresented in research. To address this, we examined the role of apologies that were offered for the El Mozote massacre (El Salvador), the Jeju 4.3 massacres (Republic of Korea) and Bloody Sunday (United Kingdom), according to members of these communities and the broader public. Although we anticipated that victim community members should find the apology more valuable and meaningful and should, therefore, be more positive about its role in healing and reconciliation processes, we found that this varies across countries. This variation could be explained by people's trust in the country's institutions. Across the samples, we found that the apology was seen as a relatively important gesture. For the apology to be perceived as impactful, however, it had to

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be seen as a meaningful (i.e. sincere) gesture. Our findings suggest that apologies have a role to play in the aftermath of human rights violations, but that it is essential to take the broader context into account.

#### KEYWORDS

apologies, healing, human rights violations, reconciliation, victim communities

## BACKGROUND

I, as the President, holding responsibility of government accept the Committee's suggestion and truly extend my official apology for the wrongdoings of those national authorities in the past. I also cherish the sacrificed spirits and pray for the repose of the innocent victims.

(Roh Moo-hyun, 2003, Republic of Korea)

Some members of our armed forces acted wrongly. The Government are ultimately responsible for the conduct of the armed forces, and for that, on behalf of the Government—indeed, on behalf of our country—I am deeply sorry.

(David Cameron, 2010, United Kingdom)

For this massacre, for the aberrant human rights violations and for the abuses carried out, on behalf of the Salvadoran State, I apologize. As President of the Republic and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, I apologize to the families of the victims and the neighboring communities.

(Mauricio Funes, 2012, El Salvador)

Decades after armed forces committed human rights violations against citizens in the Republic of Korea (ROK), United Kingdom and El Salvador, the heads of state or government of these countries expressed remorse for the wrong that had been done and suffering inflicted. On 31 October 2003, President Roh Moo-hyun of ROK visited Jeju Island, where he publicly apologized for the state violence, killing and repression following armed uprisings on the island from 1947 to 1954, known as the Jeju 4.3 Event or Incident. On 15 June 2010, Prime Minister David Cameron stood in the UK Parliament and apologized to the people of the City of Derry for the killing of civilians by the armed forces during a civil rights march in 1972 (known as Bloody Sunday or Bogside Massacre). On 16 January 2012, President Mauricio Funes visited the village of El Mozote, where he apologized for the brutal murder of over 1000 people in the six hamlets in northern Morazán during the Salvadoran Civil War.

In making these public gestures of atonement for past human rights violations, these state leaders are not exceptional. A newly conducted inventory shows that in recent decades, political apologies have increasingly been given by state representatives worldwide—particularly since the end of the Cold War—to address past injustices and human rights violations (Schaafsma & Zoodsma, 2021; Zoodsma & Schaafsma, 2022). Nearly half of these apologies (46%) have been offered by states or state representatives to a group within their country while a somewhat smaller part (36%) has been offered to (groups within) another country or has concerned transnational apologies (18%). Although such public statements of contrition may appear trivial in comparison to the gross human rights violations for which

they are offered, it has been theorized that they may play an important role in restoring the dignity of victims and healing their pain and may also pave the way to reconciliation (e.g. De Greiff, 2008; Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Páez, 2010; Wohl et al., 2011).

Whether political apologies fulfil this function, however, remains unclear. Although research on political apologies has grown in volume in recent years (see Hornsey et al., 2015), the voices and perspectives of victim communities have largely been underrepresented in much of this work (but see Bobowik et al., 2017; Bombay et al., 2013; Giner-Sorolla et al., 2022; Philpot et al., 2013; Wohl et al., 2013), which has tended to rely on (experimental) research with (Western) student samples and focused primarily on (fictitious) apologies between countries. These studies also paint a somewhat mixed picture of the role they might play in the aftermath of human rights violations, suggesting that people may be sceptical of the underlying motives to offer them, or that their impact (particularly on people's willingness to forgive) may be limited (Cehajic-Clancy & Brown, 2019; Ferguson et al., 2007; Hornsey et al., 2015; Philpot & Hornsey, 2008, 2011). It remains to be seen, however, whether the ideas developed and results obtained so far generalize to the often very complex and diverse situations in which apologies have been offered and whether they capture the views and experiences of those who belong to the victim community (for whom the very idea of forgiveness may be offensive) and of the larger public as well.

This study aimed to fill this gap by assessing whether apologies offered by states for human rights violations that they committed within their borders 'work' from the point of view of the victim community as well as the general public and whether this aligns with current thinking on this topic. In doing so, we go beyond existing research in three important ways. First, this is one of the few studies that compares the perspectives of victim community members on the role of an apology in healing and reconciliation processes with the views of those who are not part of the victim community.<sup>1</sup> We think it is important to include these various perspectives, as they may all help shape the reconciliation process in societies that 'try to come to terms with the past' in an important way. Second, we assess (using structural equation modelling) whether and how any differences that we find in this regard are mediated by people's evaluation of the apology itself, both in terms of its value (is it an important gesture?) and its meaning (is it sincere, honourable?). Third, we examine whether these pathways overlap or diverge across different countries. Such a cross-country approach is rare but we think it is crucial in helping to build a better understanding of how the broader context may shape the way in which apologies are perceived and understood. We hence focused on the three cases that were mentioned in the introduction: the apologies for the Jeju 4.3 massacres in the ROK, the Bloody Sunday massacre in the United Kingdom and the El Mozote massacre in El Salvador. These were selected because they comprise diverse contexts culturally, historically, socio-politically and geographically, but are also comparable in terms of the apology and the type of human rights violation for which it was offered.

## The role of political apologies in healing and reconciliation processes

Do apologies 'work'? With the rise in the number of state apologies, researchers from different disciplines have started to examine whether and how they may play a role in the aftermath of human rights violations. Much of this work has departed from the idea that apologies by state representatives could be valuable, as they may help in restoring the needs of victims or their families and in paving the way to reconciliation. For example, according to Govier and Verwoerd (2002), apologies by state representatives indicate an *acknowledgment*, not only of the wrongdoing itself but also of the moral status of victims and the legitimacy of the negative emotions that they may feel due to the harm that has been inflicted on them or those around them. From the perspective of the

<sup>1</sup>We recognize the term victim can mean many things. Members of non-victim communities may have also been victims of *other* human rights violations. We used these terms for brevity's sake and because we consider them the most appropriate in the context of this paper.

needs-based model of reconciliation (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008, 2015) this acknowledgment is important, as it may help restore a sense of agency and dignity among victims, who may experience less control over their environment and a lower sense of self-worth or honour as a result of the harm that has been inflicted on them (Thompson, 2008; Vollhardt et al., 2014). It has also been argued that apologies (provided that they are perceived as sincere) may contribute to (intergroup) reconciliation, not only because they can address fundamental psychological needs but because they may promote empathy and trust, and (in some cases) elicit forgiveness as well (e.g. De Greiff, 2008; Páez, 2010; Staub, 2008; but see Hornsey et al., 2015).

We wanted to know whether these ideas align with the perspectives and experiences of those who are part of a community receiving an apology and those who are not. In line with the needs-based model of reconciliation, we expected that the apology would be more valuable for victim community members than for non-victim community members. Our key rationale for this was that in each of these countries, the apology was the first official acknowledgment of the harm and suffering that was inflicted, ending a long period of silence and denial. We thus assumed that it may have provided victim community members with a long-awaited sense of recognition, which may have confirmed their human dignity and worth and may also have signalled their (re)inclusion in the moral community (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Philpot et al., 2013). We anticipated that for members of non-victim communities, such considerations would be less relevant as the apology did not involve a harm that had impacted them or their community directly and was also not specifically directed to them. As such, we expected them to be more indifferent about the apology.

In light of their experiences, however, one could argue that victim community members may also be likely to distrust any apology by the state, or may think of it as a gesture that is made primarily for political gains, particularly when offered by a state representative who was not directly responsible for the harm that has been inflicted. Thus, even though the offering of an apology in and of itself may be important for victim community members, the actual apology could be perceived as a relatively meaningless gesture rather than as a sincere attempt to address the wrongs from the past. Scarce research on real-life state apologies suggests, however, that victim community members are less sceptical than non-victim community members in this regard. For example, Bobowik et al. (2017) found that victim group members in Chile, Argentina and Paraguay evaluated an apology that was offered more positively (e.g. more sincere) than non-victim group members. Similarly, Wohl et al. (2013) found in a study on the Canadian apology for the Chinese head tax that Chinese Canadians were more likely to think that the apology was sincere than European Canadians.

We hence expected that victim community members would not only think of the apology as a more valuable gesture, but that they would find it more meaningful as compared to nonvictim community members as well. We also expected that this would in turn be related to a more positive evaluation of the apology's role in healing and reconciliation processes. Although few studies have directly assessed the perspectives of victim community members (also relative to non-victim community members) on what an apology does for victims and for the broader community, there is some evidence that it may be seen as a signal of some progress towards reconciliation (e.g. Philpot et al., 2013) and that a more positive evaluation of an apology is linked to a more positive assessment of its effectiveness as well. For example, in their study on the evaluation of the Canadian government's apology for the Head Tax, Wohl et al. (2013) found a positive relationship between the perceived sincerity of the apology and its expected impact on intergroup relations, although they also found that this effect disappeared over time. Bobowik et al. (2017) did not directly assess the role of an apology in healing and reconciliation processes, but they did find that victim group members perceived a more positive socioemotional climate in their country than non-victims and that this was mediated by a more positive assessment of the apology.

Nevertheless, we also took into account the possibility that we may find differences across the three countries in how victim and non-victim community members evaluate the apology, and in how this is linked to its perceived role in healing and reconciliation processes. For example, Bobowik et al. (2017) found that victims of state terror in Paraguay and Argentina evaluated the apologies that were offered more positively (e.g. as more sincere and effective in promoting empathy) than

non-victims, whereas they found a reverse pattern in Chile. According to the authors, this may have to do with the fact that in Paraguay and Argentina, people had more trust in the government compared with Chile. In the countries that we selected for our study such differences may play a role as well. Data from the Wellcome Global Monitor, 2019 show that in 2018 only 35% of El Salvador's population had some or a lot of trust in the government, whereas this was 51% for United Kingdom and 62% for ROK. The three cases also differ, however, on a number of other dimensions such as the scale of the transgression (with the number of deaths being highest on Jeju Island) and when it occurred (with the Jeju massacres being the least recent). These factors may differentially impact people's interpretation and evaluation of the apology. For example, according to the trust-based model of apologies (Hornsey & Wohl, 2013), the severity of the human rights violation may contribute to a low-trust context where people may be less positive about an apology, but this may be countered by the fact that the events took place in a more distant past. In view of these different possibilities, we found it difficult to make very specific predictions as to exactly how the patterns may vary across the three countries. We did, however, measure participants' trust in their country's institutions and the apology giver, as we wanted to be able to assess whether this may explain any cross-country differences in victim and non-victim community members' perspectives on the apology that was offered.

## The present study

To select the cases for this study, we relied on the Political Apology Database (Schaafsma & Zoodtsma, 2021). We looked for apologies that were offered by states to a group within the country after the year 2000, for a similar type of human rights violation. We also searched for apologies that included an expression of sorry or remorse and an acknowledgment of wrongdoing. We searched for cases in different parts of the world to assess whether people's perceptions of an apology may vary across contexts.

Accordingly, we selected the apologies made by El Salvador, the ROK and the United Kingdom. In all these cases a massacre (albeit different in scale) was perpetrated by the armed forces during a time of wider conflict. Chronologically, the earliest of these massacres happened in the ROK. Here, a series of armed uprisings occurred on Jeju Island against the South Korean Interim Government (1947–1954). The response was brutal counterinsurgency actions (mass arrests, forced migration, torture) resulting in the massacre of approximately 25,000–30,000 civilians on the island (Kim, 2014). The Bloody Sunday massacre in Northern Ireland took place during the civil war, known as The Troubles (1969–1998). On 30 January 1972, as civilians marched in the City of Derry/Londonderry to protest the British policy to imprison people without trial, British armed officers opened fire on these demonstrators, resulting in the death of 14 civilians. The El Mozote massacre in El Salvador took place during 11–13 December 1981. Whilst the Salvadoran civil war (1979–1992) between the right-wing Salvadoran armed forces and the left-wing guerrillas was under way, the Salvadoran Atlacatl Army Battalion swept through the hamlet of El Mozote and surrounding villages and massacred more than 1000 men, women and children as part of a scorched earth operation.

In each of the three countries, the massacre was followed by silence and suppression of the events from higher authorities. Owing largely to grassroots organizations, an investigation or truth commission was eventually conducted in each country, many years after the human rights violations had occurred. It was only following these investigations that the apologies were made by the state. Although there are differences in how these apologies were offered (e.g. President Funes and President Roh offered the apology in the victim community's locale, whereas Prime Minister Cameron offered the apology in Parliament), they all contain an explicit sorry statement and an acknowledgment of the wrongdoing (albeit more explicitly in the Salvadoran and UK apologies). All three apologies clearly reach out to the victims, either by recognizing their suffering or by rhetorically reincluding them within the larger society. Furthermore, they express intentions for future peace and reconciliation, and two apologies (El Salvador and ROK) contain some sort of promise for reparations.



## METHOD

### Participants

Across the three countries, we obtained community samples from the victim communities (the relevant hamlets of Morazán in El Salvador, Jeju Island in the ROK and Derry/Londonderry in Northern Ireland, United Kingdom) as well as non-victim communities. In El Salvador, this sample comprised individuals from and living in cities, towns and villages across the country. In the ROK, the non-victims came mainly from Seoul and its suburbs, as well as other cities and semi-urban areas across the country. Finally, the non-victim community in the United Kingdom comprised individuals from cities, towns and villages across England.

Participants were recruited on a snowball sampling basis with the assistance of local collaborators and research assistants. We used a stratified sampling matrix aiming for a balanced distribution across age groups (18–34, 35–64, 65+), gender and education level. Two participants (El Salvador, ROK) were excluded for their age (17). We also aimed for an even distribution of participants from the non-victim communities across rural and urban areas, and on Jeju Island as well due to its nature of urbanization. A summary of the sample descriptive statistics is found in [Table 1](#).

### Data collection procedure

We secured ethical approval prior to commencing data collection, which took place between May–December 2019. Participants were approached via trained local research assistants, who informed them about the main purpose of the study. People who consented to participate were provided with a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. In most cases, they completed the questionnaire on their own, but research assistants remained close by in case they had questions or wanted the apology excerpt read to them. Some participants struggled with literacy. In such cases, the assistants helped with reading the apology and the questions. At the beginning and end of the questionnaire, participants were informed that they could contact a local counsellor, should they experience any anxiety or discomfort as a result of the study.

Participants were informed that we were interested in understanding how people evaluate the apology given for the respective human rights violation ([Appendix S1](#)). In the questionnaire, they were first asked to read a selected excerpt from the relevant apology. When selecting these excerpts, we focused on the parts that contained an explicit expression of ‘sorry’ or ‘apologize’ and an acknowledgment of the wrongdoing. The statement was preceded by a brief informative summary about the apology (speaker, date given, human rights violation to which it referred). Considering the possibility that the non-victim community may be less or not familiar with the human rights violation or the apology, more information (e.g. key date, number of deaths; see [Appendix S1](#)) was provided in the introductory section. Following the information and excerpt, participants were asked to rate the apology on several dimensions. When preparing the studies, we recognized that our rating scales may not be immediately obvious for all the participants (e.g. due to unfamiliarity with them) and that in the rural areas of El Salvador terms such as ‘a little’ were used even when ‘a lot’ was meant. After careful discussion and calibration with our local collaborators, we decided to show a schematic representation of the answer scales in the form of corn stalks at different stages of growth in the rural areas of El Salvador and the ROK, which participants could use to report their ratings per item ([Appendix S1](#)). The questionnaire ended with demographics and control questions.

### Measures

Prior to developing the questionnaires, the principal investigators visited the victim communities in the three countries to obtain a better understanding of the local context. The information gathered during

TABLE 1 Sample descriptives<sup>a</sup>

	El Salvador		Republic of Korea		United Kingdom	
	Morazán ( <i>n</i> = 159)	NV ( <i>n</i> = 161)	Jeju Island ( <i>n</i> = 166)	NV ( <i>n</i> = 169)	Northern Ireland ( <i>n</i> = 192)	NV ( <i>n</i> = 164)
Age						
Mean	51.87	45.84	48.21	43.58	44.45	44.06
<i>SD</i>	17.61	20.56	20.84	20.62	16.81	18.35
Range	18–84	17–89	17–83	19–87	18–81	18–93
Gender <sup>b</sup>						
Men	77	77	84	73	85	72
Women	82	84	82	96	107	91
Education						
Low	65.8%	36.6%	15.1%	7.1%	19.3%	19.5%
Medium	17.6%	26.7%	44.0%	55.0%	41.1%	52.8%
High	17.0%	35.4%	38.6%	33.7%	38.5%	24.4%
Religious						
Yes	135	128	73	86	92	44
No	15	32	90	79	97	118
Impact violence <sup>c</sup>						
Mean	3.77	–	3.27	–	3.92	–
<i>SD</i>	1.28		1.00		0.90	
Awareness of apology <sup>c</sup>						
Mean	–	3.49	–	2.65	–	2.86
<i>SD</i>		1.27		1.98		1.33
Qualifies as apology <sup>c,d</sup>						
Mean	3.61	2.62	3.50	3.10	2.55	2.65
<i>SD</i>	.95	1.27	1.06	1.02	1.23	1.17
Trust sender <sup>c,e</sup>						
Mean	3.50	2.30	3.51	3.30	1.92	2.29
<i>SD</i>	1.01	1.23	1.03	0.90	1.05	1.13
Trust institutions <sup>c,e</sup>						
Mean	2.75	2.55	2.40	2.26	1.52	2.61
<i>SD</i>	0.87	0.87	0.81	0.71	0.60	0.89

Abbreviation: NV, Non-victim community.

<sup>a</sup>The choice of sample size ( $n = 300$  per country) was according to minimum recommendations for SEM models (Kline, 2016), but was also based on feasibility given our approach of sampling a cross-section of the populations while relying on local contacts and researchers.

<sup>b</sup>Third option 'other, please specify' in United Kingdom only (non-victim, *other n* = 1).

<sup>c</sup>Rated on a 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely) scale.

<sup>d</sup>Within-country comparisons were significantly different at .05, except for the United Kingdom ( $p = .16$ ).

<sup>e</sup>Within-country comparisons were significantly different at .05, except for the Republic of Korea ( $p = .090$  for trust in apology giver and  $p = .092$  for trust in institutions).

these visits was used as background information when developing the questionnaire. A first draft was developed in English and checked by our local collaborators to identify any issues that may lead to confusion or cause too much discomfort. A final draft of the questionnaire was translated into Latin American Spanish and Korean, then back-translated into English. Any discrepancies and oddities found between the original and back translation were discussed with our cross-country collaborators.

## Perceived value and meaning of apology

To assess participants' evaluation of the apology itself, they were presented with items developed by the research team based on the literature and the research visits to the three countries. These items assessed how much participants valued the apology (e.g. important, necessary, useless) and its meaning or sincerity (e.g. sincere, honourable). We also included items that assessed how satisfied they were with the apology (e.g. satisfactory, sufficient). All items (Appendix S1) were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all to 5 = extremely). An initial multigroup principal component analysis yielded a three-factor solution, whereby all the negatively worded items loaded on a separate factor. As this may be indicative of a method effect (Lindwall et al., 2012), we removed these items from the analyses. A follow-up multigroup principal component analysis on the remaining positively worded items revealed a two-factor structure. The items that assessed people's perspectives on the sincerity of the apology (sincere, honest, heartfelt, honourable) and their satisfaction with the apology (satisfactory, sufficient) loaded on the first factor ( $> .67$ , explained variance 56.7%) and we named this factor Meaning. Items that assessed the value of the apology (important, necessary, justified) loaded on the second factor ( $> .51$ , explained variance 11.6%), which we named Value. The alpha's for the perceived meaning scale were .90 for El Salvador, .91 for the ROK and .89 for the United Kingdom. The alpha's for the perceived value scale were .78 for El Salvador, .73 for the ROK and .81 for the United Kingdom.

## Perceived function of apology

The items that assessed the perceived role of the apology in healing and reconciliation processes were also developed by the research team based on the literature and the cross-country visits. Sample items included 'I believe the statement made by [sender] about the [human rights violation] helps in achieving justice for the victim families' and 'I believe the statement made by [sender] helps atone the wrongdoing that happened' (see Appendix S1). The items were rated on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Here too, an initial multigroup principal component analysis yielded a two-factor solution, with all negatively worded items loading on a separate factor. A follow-up analysis with the negative items removed showed a one-factor solution, explaining 53.4% of the variance. The alpha's were .85 for El Salvador and .89 for the ROK and United Kingdom.

## Additional measures

We also queried participants' age, gender, education level and self-reported religious practice. We also asked to what extent participants felt the statement qualified as an apology and (for the victim communities) to what extent the human rights violations had impacted them, their family and community. In addition, we asked participants in the non-victim community how aware they were of the apology prior to participating in the study. The descriptive statistics for these measures are displayed in Table 1. Furthermore, we assessed the perceived trustworthiness of the apology giver (one item) and participants' trust in the country's institutions (government, military/army, police, courts).<sup>2</sup> These latter items correlated well together (alpha's  $> .77$ ) so we combined them. As shown in Table 1, members from the victim community in El Salvador had higher mean scores on the trust measures than members from the non-victim communities, whereas the opposite was the case for the UK samples. No such differences were found in the ROK.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>In the Northern Ireland sample, we also assessed trust in the Northern Island Assembly but excluded this item from the present analyses.

<sup>3</sup>As this study was part of a larger research project, the questionnaire included some additional questions that are not included in the present analyses (e.g. identification with the victim community and country, perceptions of cultural norms).



**TABLE 2** Means and standard deviations of value, meaning, and function measures across country and victim and non-victim community members

	El Salvador		Republic of Korea				United Kingdom					
	Morazán		Non-victim		Jeju Island		Non-victim		Northern Ireland		Non-victim	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Value	3.98	0.94	3.25	1.09	3.65	0.89	3.50	0.95	3.88	1.15	3.22	1.08
Meaning	3.64	0.78	2.39	0.99	3.46	0.88	3.17	0.92	2.36	1.01	2.65	0.91
Impact	3.14	0.65	2.34	0.88	3.41	0.80	3.03	0.81	2.33	0.96	2.21	0.78

*Note:* Within-country comparisons were significantly different at .01 or beyond for all countries, except for the Republic of Korea on the Value measure ( $p = .225$ ) and for the United Kingdom on the Function measure ( $p = .592$ ).

## RESULTS

### Preliminary analyses and descriptive statistics

We first examined the degree of invariance exhibited by our latent measures, to check whether we could statistically compare structural relations across the countries. For the measures that assessed the value and meaning of the apology, we conducted a Procrustes rotation in R Studio (with the average correlation matrix of the items across all countries as a reference). This revealed good factorial agreement for the Meaning factor (with Tucker's phi ranging from .96 to .99). For the Value factor, we also found good factorial agreement for El Salvador and the United Kingdom, with a Tucker's phi of .96 and .98, respectively. For the ROK, Tucker's phi was .89, suggesting factor similarity rather than equality (e.g. Lorenzo-Seva & ten Berge, 2006). This primarily had to do with the item *justified*, which also loaded on the Meaning factor. For the scale that assessed the perceived function of the apology, we found factor similarity for El Salvador and the ROK (Tucker's phi .90 and .92, respectively) but not for the United Kingdom (.81). Based on these findings, we decided to run separate models for each country.

Table 2 displays the mean scores for the measures, across victim and non-victim communities in El Salvador, the ROK and the United Kingdom. In all three countries, participants (and victim community members in particular) tended to think of the apology as a relatively valuable gesture. Compared to this evaluation, however, the scores on the perceived meaning and function measures are significantly lower, suggesting that across the three countries participants were more sceptical about the intentions behind the apology and its role in healing and reconciliation processes ( $F_s > 5.00$ ,  $p_s < .026$ ). This was particularly the case for non-victim community members in El Salvador and the ROK. In the United Kingdom, members from the victim community were more likely to question the sincerity of the apology and they did not differ from non-victim community members in their evaluation of the function of the apology.

### Relationships between the perceived value, meaning and function of apology in each country

Given that we were unable to establish metric equivalence for the measures, we estimated full structural equation models with latent variables for each country separately to examine the relationships between the perceived value and meaning of the apology and its function across the victim and non-victim communities. Using Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017), we first estimated the measurement model of the latent variables Value, Meaning and Function, each defined by their indicators (items). Next, we estimated the structural model (the regression paths between the latent variables), freeing the residuals of the Meaning and Value factors to covary. In view of the diversity of our samples, we controlled for age, gender and educational level in these analyses (for an overview of correlations, see Table 3). Taking the

**TABLE 3** Correlations across countries (victim communities below the diagonal, non-victim communities above the diagonal)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>El Salvador</b>						
1. Value	–	.68***	.50***	–.01	–.16*	.16*
2. Meaning	.71***	–	.59***	.02	–.01	.05
3. Function	.36***	.65***	–	.03	.07	–.00
4. Gender (1 = female)	.07	.08	.01	–	–.05	.10
5. Age	.06	.13	.04	.05	–	–.38***
6. Education	–.11	–.20*	–.11	–.09	–.61**	–
<b>Republic of Korea</b>						
1. Value	–	.73***	.70***	.06	–.30***	.13
2. Meaning	.79***	–	.77***	–.06	–.06	.06
3. Function	.61***	.69***	–	.03	.00	.12
4. Gender (1 = female)	.03	.02	.02	–	.02	.01
5. Age	.08	.18*	.19*	–.10	–	–.18*
6. Education	–.03	–.04	.02	.01	–.28***	–
<b>United Kingdom</b>						
1. Value	–	.48***	.39***	.05	–.17*	.21**
2. Meaning	.58***	–	.52***	–.02	–.03	.06
3. Function	.54***	.60***	–	.01	.05	.07
4. Gender (1 = female)	–.06	–.02	–.04	–	–.05	.04
5. Age	.02	–.07	.18*	–.07	–	–.20*
6. Education	.12	.10	.11	.01	–.33***	–

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

non-victim community members as the reference group, we examined the direct paths of victim group to the two evaluation variables (Value and Meaning) and the perceived role in healing and reconciliation processes, as well as the indirect paths to the function variable via the evaluation variables. The results of each country are reported below. Model fit indices (Hu & Bentler, 1998; Kline, 2016) and regression path coefficients of the structural models are presented in Figures 1–3.

In the model that we estimated for the Salvadoran sample, the residuals of the indicators reconciliation and moving on were freed to covary (Figure 1). In line with our expectations, we found that victim community members were more likely to think that the apology was meaningful ( $B = 1.17$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $1.02 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < 1.32$ ), compared with non-victim community members. This, in turn, was also related to a more positive evaluation of its role in healing and reconciliation processes. The analyses also revealed that victim community members were more likely to think that the apology was valuable ( $B = .78$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $.59 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < .97$ ), although this was not related to their perceptions of its function in healing and reconciliation processes.

In the estimated model for the ROK (Figure 2), the residuals of five pairs of indicators were freed to covary: honest and sufficient and heartfelt and sincere on the Meaning factor, dignity and justice, reconciliation and moving on, atone and forgive on the Function factor. As in the El Salvador sample, we found that victim community members were more likely to think that the apology was meaningful ( $B = .29$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $.09 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < .48$ ), which was, in turn, related to a more positive evaluation of its role in healing and reconciliation processes. We found, however, no significant difference between victim or non-victim community members in how valuable they thought the apology was, and this was also not related to its perceived function ( $B = .14$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $–.06 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < .34$ ).

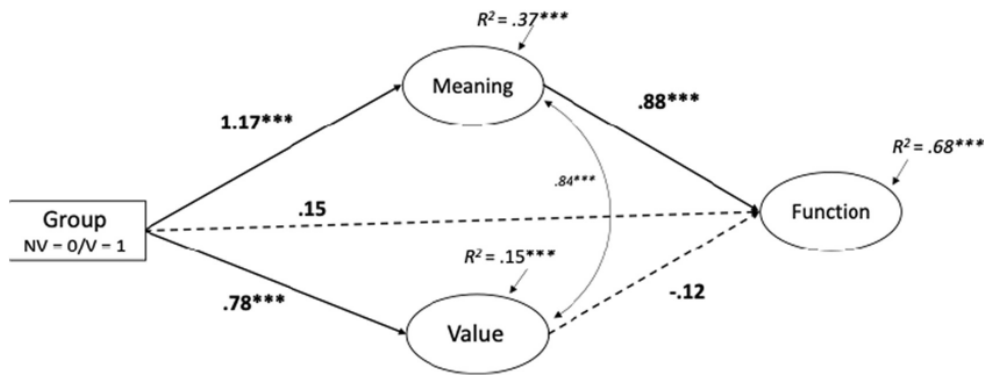


FIGURE 1 Structural equation model of victim and non-victim community members' evaluation of apology—El Salvador sample.  $\chi^2(171) = 336.087, p < .0001, \chi^2/df < 3, RMSEA = .055 (.05, .06), p = .163, CFI = .934, TLI = .922, SRMR = .05$ . Paths between latent variables are standardized. Significant paths are solid lines; non-significant paths are dashed lines. \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Indirect effects: Victim group via meaning on function,  $B = 1.03, p < .001, .62 < 95\% CIs < 1.43$ . No significant indirect paths via value

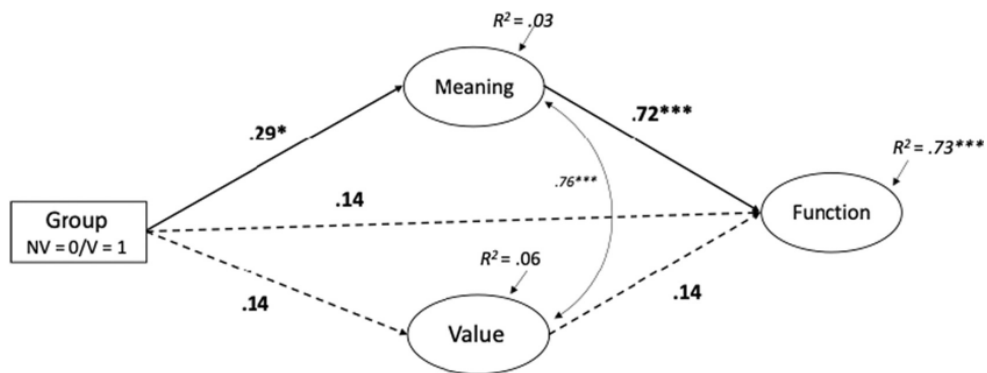


FIGURE 2 Structural equation model of victim and non-victim community members' evaluation of apology—Republic of Korea sample.  $\chi^2(167) = 405.790, p < .0001, \chi^2/df < 3, RMSEA = .067 (.06, .08), p < .001, CFI = .920, TLI = .902, SRMR = .06$ . Paths between latent variables are standardized. Significant paths are solid lines; non-significant paths are dashed lines. \* $p < .05, ***p < .001$ . Indirect effects: Indirect effects: Victim group via meaning on function,  $B = .20, p = .028, .05 < 95\% CIs < .36$ . No significant indirect effects via value

In the UK sample, the pattern was again somewhat different. In these analyses, the residuals of the indicators of reconciliation and moving on were freed to covary, as were those of atonement and forgiveness, and important and necessary (Figure 3). Contrary to the Salvadoran and Korean samples, we found that non-victim community members were more likely to think that the apology was meaningful than victim community members ( $B = -.31, SE = .11, -.50 < 95\% CIs < -.13$ ), which, in turn, was related to a more positive evaluation of its role in healing and reconciliation processes. Victim community members were, however, more likely to see the apology as a valuable gesture ( $B = .55, SE = .14, .32 < 95\% CIs < .78$ ), which was also positively related to their views on its role in healing and reconciliation processes.

### Additional exploratory analyses: The role of (institutional) trust

Although we had not formulated any specific a priori expectations as to how people's trust in the apology giver or in their country's institutions may impact their perspectives on the apology that was

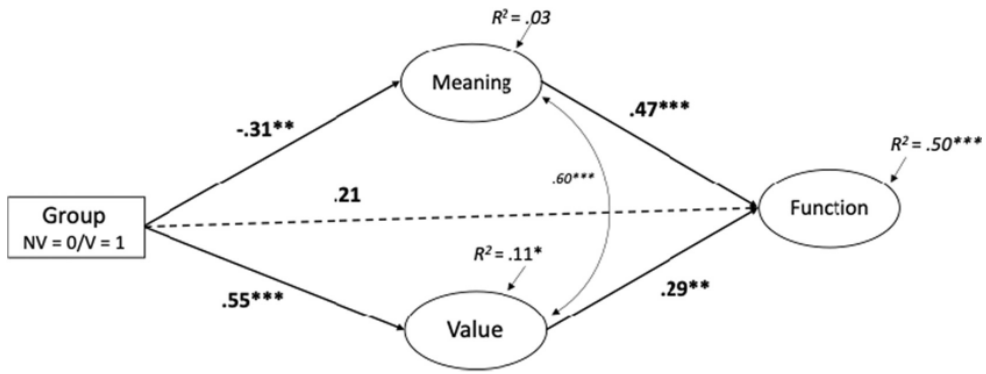


FIGURE 3 Structural equation model of victim and non-victim community members' evaluation of apology—UK sample.  $\chi^2(169) = 374.554, p < .0001, \chi^2/df < 3, RMSEA = .059 (.05, .07), p = .028, CFI = .921, TLI = .905, SRMR = .06$ . Paths between latent variables are standardized. Significant paths are solid lines; non-significant paths are dashed lines.  $**p < .01, ***p < .001$ . Indirect effects: Non-victim group via meaning on function,  $B = -.15, p = .016, -.25 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < -.05$ . Victim group via value on function,  $B = .16, p = .028, .04 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < .27$

offered, we did run additional models in which we controlled for these variables, as we wanted to check whether this may account for some of the differences that we found across the victim and non-victim communities in the three countries.

In both the United Kingdom and ROK, adding these variables had the effect that the difference between victim and non-victim community members in how meaningful they thought the apology was, was no longer significant ( $B = .12, SE = .12, -.08 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < .33$  and  $B = .12, SE = .09, -.04 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < .28$ , respectively). In the Salvadoran sample, the differences in this regard became less pronounced, although they were still significant ( $B = .76, SE = .11, .58 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < .94$ ). Regarding the differences that we had found in how victim community and non-victim community members valued the apology (in the United Kingdom and El Salvador), the pattern was a bit different. Adding the trust variables had the effect that these differences became *more* pronounced in the UK sample ( $B = .94, SE = .16, .68 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < 1.20$ ), but *less* pronounced in the El Salvador sample ( $B = .36, SE = .14, .13 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < .59$ ). In the Korean sample, there was still no significant difference between the community groups in their perception of the value of the apology when controlling for the trust variables ( $B = -.004, SE = .10, -.18 < 95\% \text{ CIs} < .17$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Although there has been much debate about how valuable and meaningful political apologies are in the wake of human rights violations and how they may impact victim communities and contribute to processes of reconciliation, only a few studies have examined the perspectives of victim community members in this regard (also relative to non-victim community members). Our aim in this study was to address this and to do so using a cross-national comparative approach, whereby we were also interested in whether and how the patterns may vary across different contexts.

Overall, we had anticipated that members from victim communities should find the apology more valuable (e.g. important) and meaningful (e.g. sincere) than non-victim community members, and we expected that this would be positively related to their views on its role in healing and reconciliation processes. We found partial support for this, with important differences between the three countries. For example, in El Salvador we found that victim community members were indeed *more* likely than non-victim community members to think of the apology as a valuable and meaningful gesture. In the United Kingdom, members from victim communities were also more likely to see the apology as a valuable gesture, but they were *less* likely than non-victim community members to think that it

was meaningful. In the ROK, victim community members did not differ from non-victim community members in how valuable they thought that the apology was. As in El Salvador, however, they were *more* likely to think that it was a meaningful gesture. We also found contextual similarities and differences in the relationships between participants' evaluations of the apology and their perceptions of its role in healing and reconciliation processes. For example, across the three samples, we found positive relationships between the perceived meaning of the apology and its perceived role in healing and reconciliation processes. The perceived value of the apology, however, was only positively related to its perceived role in healing and reconciliation in the United Kingdom, but not in El Salvador and the ROK.

These findings show that, for a thorough understanding of how apologies are received by victim communities and the wider public, it is crucial to not only focus on individual-level or psychological determinants (Nadler & Shnabel, 2015), but to take the broader context within which they are offered into account (see Bobowik et al., 2017; Giner-Sorolla et al., 2022; Wohl et al., 2013). For example, although we made sure to select apologies that shared a number of key characteristics and cases that involved a similar type of transgression, there were also important differences such as the scale of the transgression, the recency of the apology, and the amount of time that had passed between the human rights violations and the moment the apology was offered. In addition, the political and economic situation in each of these countries is and was different and our data suggest that people's trust in the institutions and the apology giver may play a particularly important role in how they value and interpret the apology. For instance, victim community members in United Kingdom had on average *less* trust in David Cameron and the country's institutions, which may reflect the fact that a notable portion of people in Northern Ireland still support independence from United Kingdom. When controlling for this in the analyses, we found that there was no longer a significant difference between victim and non-victim community members in their evaluation of the meaning of the apology, whereas the victim community's perception of the value of the apology became stronger. In El Salvador, however, victim community members had *more* trust in the country's institutions than non-victim community members, and in the apology giver (Mauricio Funes) in particular. Although it is possible that these levels of trust were higher as a result of the apology (but see Steele & Blatz, 2014), Funes' membership of the party (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) that had fought against the military-led junta government during the Salvadoran Civil War is likely to have played a role in this regard as well. In El Salvador, we also found that people's trust explained (at least partially) why they were more likely to see the apology as a meaningful *and* valuable gesture as the difference between the victim and non-victim community members became less pronounced when we controlled for it in the analyses. In the Korean sample, victim community members did not differ from non-victim community members in how much they trusted the country's institutions, although the latter expressed somewhat more faith in President Roh. This also seemed to account for some of the differences in victim and non-victim community members' evaluations of how meaningful the apology was.

By and large, we found that participants from the victim as well as the non-victim communities felt that the apology was a relatively important gesture. Interestingly, this was not necessarily related to its perceived role in processes of healing and reconciliation (only in the United Kingdom). In line with previous research (e.g. Philpot & Hornsey, 2008), this suggests that the recognition of wrongdoing can be an important act in and of itself, regardless of its broader implications. From a needs-based perspective (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008, 2015), one could argue that this should hold for victim community members in particular, as the apology may—by ending a long period of silence and countering denial—signal their human worth and dignity and provide them with a sense of justice or agency. It is possible, however, that a public act of recognition of past wrongdoing is valuable for non-victim members as well because it may help overcome the need for a belief in a just world (Lerner, 1977), one in which the state takes responsibility for past mistakes and injustices, and promises to not repeat them. Future research should examine in more detail the role that such beliefs may play in how people evaluate apologies by the state.

Relative to its perceived value, we found that participants across the three countries (and the United Kingdom in particular) were somewhat less positive about how meaningful the apology was. In the

United Kingdom, this could have had to do with the political signature of David Cameron whose Conservative Party had long been reluctant to support a new public inquiry into the killings. This may have generated scepticism as to the underlying motives for the apology among the victim community. For both Presidents Roh and Funes, it may have been easier to convincingly distance themselves from the transgression and the perpetrators. President Funes was a member of the party that was formed out of the leftist guerrilla organizations that had fought the junta government during the Salvadoran Civil War, while President Roh had a background as a human rights lawyer. It hence seems likely that people's evaluations of the meaningfulness of the apology is influenced by the background of the person who delivers the statement, both at the time of the apology and thereafter. Future studies may want to assess how this interacts with people's own political orientation and preferences as this may also impact the extent to which they think of an apology by a political leader as a meaningful gesture. Our data show that such evaluations are important, as they are also closely connected to people's views on the apology's role in healing and reconciliation processes.

Taken together, we think that our findings provide a nuanced insight into the similarities and differences in how victim and non-victim community members in very different parts of the world evaluate an apology that was offered to their community or in their country. Our study is among the first to take this cross-country perspective and we believe that future research and theorizing could benefit from more comparative research on the value, meaning and role of apologies in diverse settings. Obviously, such studies in different cultural and linguistic areas can also be challenging. For example, in our case, we were not able to establish metric equivalence of some of our measures. This could point to actual differences between the samples, as the language used to discuss and evaluate moral concepts like apologies may have a specific terminology that can be rooted in cultural differences or linguistic specificities (e.g. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Dundes Renteln, 2008; Fischer & Karl, 2019). Further research is needed to more confidently untangle what may explain the differences that we found in this regard. We also found that the negatively worded items that we had included to counter potential acquiescence bias resulted in artifactual factoring (Spector et al., 1997). In retrospect, including separate questions may have more directly assessed social desirability responding. For example, we cannot rule out that some of the relatively high correlations and means across the victim and non-victim communities in the ROK were a result of this tendency.

Obviously, our study is retrospective and some time had passed between the apology in each of the countries and the moment we conducted our study. For future studies, it would be valuable to include cases where an apology has been offered more recently and to examine people's perceptions of this apology and its impact over time. We also cannot rule out that some of the differences that we found can (at least partially) be explained by our study's setup. For example, we provided non-victim community participants with some additional contextual information as we were not certain how much they would know about the human rights violations. Although we do not have any direct evidence for this, it is possible that this additional information may have inadvertently impacted their evaluation of the value, meaning, or impact of the apology. We also recognize that with a survey study, certain nuances such as why the apology is viewed as valuable or meaningful and how it is perceived to impact various elements of healing of the victim community and broader reconciliation, cannot be captured in the same way as in-depth interviews.

We did capture, however, the perceptions of communities in real world examples of gross human rights violations. Based on our findings, we think it is important that future research not only focuses on the perceived sincerity of an apology or its effects on people's intentions to forgive the perpetrators but examines more broadly what an apology achieves (or does not) for victim communities, whether symbolically or tangibly. Whereas previous research has often failed to establish a link between apologies and individual outcome measures such as forgiveness (see Hornsey et al., 2015) and has shown that the expression of secondary emotions such as shame or guilt in apologies may even be counterproductive (Wohl et al., 2012), our findings show that apologies are nonetheless valued by members from victim communities and the larger public. From this perspective, apologies do seem to have a role to play in the aftermath of human rights violations—even if only symbolically—particularly when they are also seen as a meaningful gesture.



## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Thia Sagherian-Dickey:** Conceptualization; formal analysis; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; supervision; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Juliette Schaafsma:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; supervision; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Marieke Zoodsma:** Conceptualization; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; supervision; visualization; writing – review and editing. **HaJung Cho:** Investigation; project administration; supervision; writing – review and editing. **Iwan Dinnick:** Investigation; project administration; supervision; writing – review and editing. **Jimin Kim:** Investigation; methodology; project administration; supervision; writing – review and editing. **Masi Noor:** Project administration; supervision; writing – review and editing. **Rhiannon N. Turner:** Project administration; supervision; writing – review and editing. **María Sol Yáñez de la Cruz:** Investigation; methodology; project administration; supervision; writing – review and editing.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare no conflict of interest

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Upon publication, all data will be made publicly available on Dataverse.

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

All data collection and processing was conducted in accordance with the ethical codes of conduct of the European Charter for Researchers, the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Scientific Practice (2012), the Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2012) and the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (AAA, 1998)

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