Global Perceptions of State Apologies for Human Rights Violations

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Abstract

State apologies for human rights violations are often seen as a key mechanism in reconciliation processes. Nevertheless, they are often contested as well and have not been embraced equally by countries around the world. This raises questions about their universal value and potential to address or redress past harmdoing by countries. In a study across 33 countries (n=11,023), we found that people around the world consider apologies by states for human rights violations to be reasonably important but tend to be less supportive of the idea that their own country should apologize for past harmdoing. We found that this discrepancy was amplified in countries with stronger honor norms and a stronger collective sense of victim- rather than perpetratorhood. Moving beyond the decontextualized approach that has prevailed in previous psychological research on this topic, our findings show that people's attitudes toward apologies by their country do not exist in a cultural and social vacuum but depend on the extent to which the broader context affords a critical reflection on past harmdoing. As such, they help explain why some countries have been reluctant to offer apologies, and why such gestures may also be more controversial in some contexts than in others.

Global Perceptions of State Apologies for Human Rights Violations

Should nations try to atone for their sins, including those that were committed by previous generations, through the offering of an apology? In the past decades, this question has become particularly urgent, as calls for state apologies have increasingly been made by victims of human rights violations or their descendants. Since the end of the Cold War, a growing number of states across the world have also responded to such calls (e.g., Schaafsma & Zoodsma, 2021; Zoodsma & Schaafsma, 2022), leading to the often-echoed observation that we now live in an 'age of apology' (Brooks, 1999), where past harmdoing is no longer ignored or denied but has become a source of national soul-searching instead (Torpey, 2006). In this era, apologies seem to have become one of the key mechanisms for countries to 'come to terms with the past', one that has not only been advocated in theorizing on transitional justice and reconciliation (e.g., Barkan & Karn, 2006; David, 2017; Wohl et al., 2011) but that is supported by trends in international law and standards as well. For example, the United Nations stipulate in their Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation that public apologies (including an acknowledgment of wrongdoing and an acceptance of responsibility) should be part of the reparations offered to victims of human rights violations by the state (United Nations, 2005).

Nevertheless, although apologies have been described as 'evolutionary viable strategies' (Martinez-Vaquero et al., 2015) that are among 'the most profound interactions that can occur between people' (Tavuchis, 1991, p. 1), it remains to be seen whether state apologies for human rights violations are universally valued. A critical difference with interpersonal apologies is that state apologies not only involve harmdoing that is generally much more severe, but that they are also offered on behalf of the entire country by a state representative rather than by those who were directly responsible, in settings that are likely to be characterized by fear and mistrust (e.g., Wohl et al., 2011). This makes state apologies much more precarious than interpersonal apologies. This can sometimes also be seen in the public response to such gestures, when people object to the offering of an apology and instead deny or resist the notion that their country is responsible or should take responsibility for any harmdoing, whether by current or previous generations. State apologies are hence not necessarily considered positively, but may also be thought of as inappropriate gestures, or as a sign of weakness that damages the country's reputation, or even as a betrayal of the past as people may not believe or accept that their country

has inflicted gross harm (e.g., Dundes Renteln, 2008; Hintjens & Ooijen, 2019; Maddux et al., 2011). This may have important ramifications, not only for whether, when and how they are offered but also for their potential to heal psychological wounds or to serve as a catalyst for restoring justice or promoting reconciliation. A case in point is Japan, where interpersonal apologies are important, but where the apologies that have been offered by the state for wartime aggression and the occupation of Korea have also resulted in the denial or glorification of past atrocities within the country, thereby alarming and angering the country's former victims (Lind, 2008).

It is hence crucial to understand how people across the globe think about state apologies for past human rights violations, and where and when they may be more or less supportive of such gestures. For this reason, we conducted a study in 33 countries across 6 continents (n = 11,023), whereby we focused on people's attitudes toward state apologies for human rights violations in general and by their own country (offered either to a group within their own country or to another country) in particular. Based on theorizing and research on the dynamics of denial and avoidance in the face of painful or disturbing events (e.g., Cohen, 2001), we expected that – even if they may see the value of state apologies at a more abstract level – people may be less likely to support the offering of an apology by their own country. We were also interested in possible cross-country differences in this regard, as we assumed that people's notions about past events and about whether and how these should be addressed are likely to be shaped by the sociocultural context in which they live, and the extent to which this context affords a critical reflection on or acknowledgment of past human rights violations. More specifically, we focused on the role that shared beliefs about the nation as a victim or perpetrator of harm and suffering, and the shared norms regarding honor and face may play in this regard. Our study is unique since it is – to our knowledge – the first large-scale cross-national study on people's attitudes toward state apologies for past harmdoing, but also moves beyond the decontextualized approach that has been dominant in much of the psychological research on this topic.

Apologies as an Antidote to Denial: Toward a More Context-based Approach

A public apology by the state for human rights violations seems to be the perfect antidote to the denial of human right violations, which has been identified as the key problem of transitional justice and reconciliation processes (e.g., Dudai, 2018). Nevertheless, the tendency to

deny uncomfortable knowledge is also pervasive and has been described as our normal state of affairs, one on which 'every personal life and every society is built' (Cohen, 2001, p. 295). According to Cohen (2001), this may involve people literally negating troubling events, but it may also imply that they reframe their meaning or significance. Research suggests that this may occur in response to gross human rights violations as well. For example, in a study among Turks about the Armenian genocide and among Hutus and Tutsis about the ethnic conflict in Burundi, it was found that participants believed that their own group was less responsible for the instigation and consequences of the violent events than the outgroup (Bilali et al., 2012, but see also Hintjens & Van Ooijen, 2019; Leach et al., 2013; Sutton & Norgaard, 2013).

Over the past decades, several psychological theories have been advanced to explain why it may be difficult for people to recognize past wrongdoing by themselves or by their group, ranging from Freud's psychoanalytic theories to theories by cognitive psychologists on cognitive dissonance (e.g., Festinger & Riecken, 1956), selective exposure (e.g., Frey, 1986), or motivated reasoning (e.g., Kunda, 1990), and theories by social psychologists on social categorization and identity processes (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Central in much of the work in the latter category is the idea that people's national identification plays a key role in predicting their reluctance to recognize past misdeeds by their country and support a state apology (e.g., Bilewicz, 2016; Bobowik et al., 2010; Wohl et al., 2006), and this has also been one of the main angles of psychological research on state apologies so far.

Much ignored in current research on this topic, however, is that people's thinking about past harmdoing by their country and how this should be dealt with is not only a psychological process but is likely to be a social and cultural phenomenon as well, shaped also by the shared beliefs and norms in a country (Cohen, 2001; Halbwachs, 1950/1980). These may, in the words of Cohen (2001, p. 10), contribute to a 'culture of denial' that is 'neither wholly private nor officially organized by the state' but has a collective character. For example, in some countries, there seems to be a collective understanding or narrative (which may or may not be based on historical facts) that the country has been a victim rather than a perpetrator of human rights violations. A good example is Poland, where the dominant narrative revolves around the idea that the country was the main victim of the Nazi-regime, leaving little room for the more

complex picture in which Poles were not only victim of the Nazis but were also involved in antisemitic pogroms during and after World War II (e.g., Kazlauskaitė, 2022).

These shared social representations of the (recent) past may serve to protect the image of the country (e.g., Liu et al., 2009), and can be shaped by (political) elites and maintained via societal institutions (for example, schools, the media, museums) or the cultural practices and images that people encounter in their everyday lives (for example, public monuments), but they can also be the result of people's communications and exchanges with each other (e.g., Bilali, 2013; Cohen, 2001; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Sutton & Norgaard, 2013). They can hence be widely and deeply ingrained in the various social and cultural structures and practices of a country and may as such also strongly influence how people think about ways to deal with past and current challenges. For example, in a situation in which the dominant narrative portrays the country as a victim rather than as a perpetrator of harmdoing, it may be easier for people to minimize or deny their country's role in inflicting (gross) harm and to also resist the offering of an apology, even if they may generally agree with the notion that apologies should be made by countries for human rights violations.

This may not only be the result of the shared narratives or beliefs about past harm in a country, however. For example, people may also be more reluctant to support an apology by their country because such a public statement of wrongdoing and regret may be at odds with a desire to protect the image of the country. This desire may be particularly prevalent in countries where honor or face norms are important, as these have to do with how concerned people are with protecting their own reputation and the reputation of their group. Both honor and face have in common that they emphasize that the respectability or worth of a person or group is determined by the judgment of others. An important difference, however, is that honor needs to be claimed or 'paid' by others, whereby people may respond with vehemence to threats to their honor or to the reputation of their group. In contrast, in settings where face norms are important, the focus is less on claiming face but more on avoiding loss of face. Here, people are more likely to be humble and to carefully observe formalities to preserve each other's face and avoid direct conflict (e.g., Boiger et al., 2014; Leung & Cohen, 2011; Smith et al., 2021). This has implications for the extent to which apologies are valued and used as well. For example, research suggests that countries or settings where honor and especially face norms prevail often have

well-defined rules regarding interpersonal apologies (e.g., Haley, 1998). Nevertheless, when apologies have to be made in public and also involve harmdoing that can negatively reflect on the whole group, reputational concerns may become particularly prominent and this may make it more difficult to admit to harmdoing (e.g., Campbell, 1964; Eaton, 2014; Uskul et al., 2019). This could imply that in countries where honor or face norms are more important, people may be less supportive of an apology by their state. A recent worldwide inventory of state apologies for human rights violations also points in that direction, as countries where such norms are likely to prevail seem to have offered relatively few apologies (e.g., Schaafsma & Zoodsma, 2021; Zoodsma & Schaafsma, 2022). Although there are various reasons why this may be the case, culturally motivated reputational concerns may play an important role here as well.

In the current research, we thus examined the role of these shared beliefs and norms in shaping people's attitudes toward state apologies. As was pointed out earlier, we were particularly interested in the difference in people's support for state apologies at a more abstract level and by their own country, as we assumed that a larger discrepancy in this regard would be indicative of a stronger tendency to minimize or reframe past misdeeds by one's own country. More specifically, in view of previous research and theorizing on people's tendency to deny uncomfortable realities, we expected that people would value state apologies at a more abstract level but would be less likely to support the offering of an apology by their own country. We also expected that this discrepancy would be larger in countries where there is a stronger belief that the country has been a victim rather than a perpetrator of past harm and suffering, and in countries where honor or face norms are more important.

It is, however, possible that a more defensive attitude toward apologies by one's own country can be linked to other contextual factors as well, such as the specific harmdoing by a country or the broader political structures and institutions, which may or may not afford a more critical reflection on or discussion about past harmdoing. In Turkey, for example, the official denial by consecutive governments of the Armenian genocide is reflected in the officially approved versions of history in schoolbooks that present Armenians as those who carried out massacres against the Turkish people in Anatolia (Bilali, 2013). Although most nations are likely to silence or downplay the 'dark chapters' from the past (e.g., De Baets, 2002; Liu et al., 2009), the possibilities to influence the narrative may be greater in more authoritarian countries or in

countries where there is less room for critical voices or the free exchange of ideas. We hence controlled for these contextual factors in our analyses. Furthermore, we controlled for individual-level factors such as participant demographics, but also for people's identification with their country as this has often been theorized to play a key role in shaping attitudes toward state harmdoing and apologies.

Method

Participants and samples

We collected data in 33 countries, whereby we explicitly aimed to include community samples in countries and regions that are likely to vary in terms of our key predictors. In addition, given that many countries and regions are often underrepresented in research, it was important for us to include a wide selection of countries across all populated continents to ensure a more fair reflection of the world's population. The regions and countries that we selected included: (North) Africa (Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Uganda), the Middle East (Jordan, Saudi Arabia), Latin America (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador), North America (United States [southern states], Canada), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Russia), South Asia (India, Pakistan), (South) East Asia (China, Indonesia, Japan, Philippines, South Korea), Europe (France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Spain, the United Kingdom), and Australia and New Zealand. Note that in some of these regions (e.g., North Africa, the Middle East, Central and South Asia, Latin America, and the southern United States) countries have been found to be relatively high on honor concerns in previous studies, whereas in parts of (South) East Asia (e.g., Japan), face concerns have been found to be relatively important (e.g., Guerra et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2021). To our knowledge, there are no worldwide data available on feelings of perceived victimhood or perpetratorhood. We made sure, however, to include countries that *have* and *have not* apologized for past human rights violations (based on the Political Apology Database, Schaafsma & Zoodsma, 2021), as we thought that this may be an indicator of the extent to which countries are more or less willing to accept a certain degree of perpetratorhood.

Participants received a link to an online questionnaire via a survey company (Dynata), except for Burkina Faso, where the survey was administered in person by research assistants due to limited internet connectivity. We aimed for 300 participants per country, equally distributed

across gender, age, educational level, and locality (urban or rural), although this was not always possible. The raw dataset that we received from the survey company included 15,354 participants, resulting (together with the data from Burkina Faso) in an initial dataset of 15,654 participants. Of these participants, 11,321 persons had completed the questionnaire. We reviewed these data for straightlining, speeding, and gibberish responses, which resulted in a final dataset of 11,023 participants (5506 women, 5492 men, 25 gender not reported, M_{age} = 38.52, SD = 14.87). For more details, see Table 1 and Table S1 in the *SI Appendix*. All participants provided informed consent. Data for most countries were collected from February until March 2021, except for Canada, Colombia, India, Ivory Coast, Philippines, New Zealand, and Uganda, where (for budgetary reasons) data collection took place from November 2021 until February 2022. The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics and Data Management Committee of the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences (Tilburg University).

Procedure

Participants were invited to a survey on 'people's opinions about what should happen after past wrongdoing by both their own and other countries'. In this survey, they were asked to think about a situation in which their country had caused harm and suffering to people either within their own country (for example, from a religious, ethnic, political, or other group), or in another country, either in the recent or distant past. They were then asked to keep this situation in mind while answering several questions, including those that assessed their attitude toward an apology by their country for this harmdoing. Prior to being asked to think about a situation in which their country had inflicted harm, participants completed a series of measures that assessed the perceived cultural values in their country, the extent to which they believed that their country had been a victim or perpetrator of harmdoing, and their attitudes toward state apologies in general. At the beginning and at the end of the questionnaire, they also answered various demographic questions. In addition, they answered several questions that allowed us to gain more insight into the specific harmdoing they had in mind. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were provided with the email address of one the researchers, whom they could contact in case they felt uncomfortable or experienced any distress as a result of the survey.

Measures

The survey was developed in English and was translated into 14 languages (see *SI Appendix,* Table S1). We verified independent back-translations of these questionnaires with local experts, and we also checked the (cultural) appropriateness and comprehensibility of the questions with them. Following this, we first tested the survey with a smaller sample (a minimum of 30 participants) in 5 countries (Argentina, Kenya, Netherlands, Russia, Saudi Arabia). We then did a soft launch of the survey across all the countries, to check for any unforeseen issues. Given that this study was part of a larger research project, the questionnaire included measures that are not reported here. The key measures that were included in the present analyses are reported below.

Attitudes toward state apologies in general and by own country. Participants' attitudes toward state apologies in general were assessed with three items (e.g., 'To what extent do you think it is important that countries in general apologize to groups or countries for past wrongdoings?'), as were their attitudes toward apologies by their own country (e.g., 'Thinking again about the situation in which your country caused harm and suffering to people, how important is it according to you that *your country* apologizes for what it has done?'). We established metric variance for the two-factor structure of these scales. See *SI Appendix*, Tables S2, S5, and Figure S1 for more details.

Perceived victimhood/perpetratorhood. We assessed participants' belief that their country had been a victim or perpetrator of past harmdoing with three items each (e.g., 'To what extent do you feel that *your/other* countries have made your country or group suffer during political conflict, war, or other occasions?'). These could be answered on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 6 (very much). We were able to establish metric invariance for these measures, although one item on the perceived victimhood scale loaded poorly in China, possibly due to translation issues. We removed this item (for China only) and conducted additional analyses without the Chinese sample as well. For more information on this and for the Cronbach's alpha per country, see *SI Appendix* (Tables S3–S5, S7). We subtracted the scores on the perceived perpetratorhood scale from the perceived victimhood scale, with a positive score indicating a stronger belief that the country has been victim rather than perpetrator of human rights violations. We used the individual scores on this measure to create country-level aggregates, which were one of our key predictors. In most countries, there seemed to be a stronger sense that the country had been a victim rather than a perpetrator of harm and suffering (see Table 2).

Perceived honor and face norms. In cross-national studies that we conducted earlier, existing measures to assess honor and face performed very poorly, so we decided (also after consultation with experts from the field) to rely on single items, whereby we asked participants to what extent it is important in their country that 'people defend their honor' and that 'people are humble to maintain good relationships'. The answer scale ranged from 0 (not at all important) to 6 (very important). Here too, we used the individual scores on these measures to create country-level aggregates, which we also used as key predictors. The country means on these measures (see Table 2) are relatively high for countries that are often seen as 'honor cultures' (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Jordan) or as 'face cultures' (e.g., Indonesia), whereby the correlation between these measures is higher in some countries than in others. See also *SI Appendix* (Table S6) for the correlations between our key predictors.

Control variables. We measured participants' identification with their country with a single item ('To what extent do you identify with [name country]?', see Postmes et al., 2013) and we also checked whether they were able to think of a specific harmdoing by their country. For this we asked them to briefly describe the situation they were thinking about or – if they did not want to do this – to indicate whether this was because they did not feel comfortable sharing or had another reason for this. For the purpose of the present analyses, we created a dummy code to indicate whether or not participants had a specific harmdoing in mind (0 = did not have a specific harmdoing in mind or did not want to share, 1 = did have a specific harmdoing in mind). To assess the details of this harmdoing, participants were also asked where this had taken place (0 = in another other country or in another country and their own country, 1 = in their own country), when this happened (0 = before they were born, 1 = in their lifetime), how severe the harmdoing was (0 = not at all severe to 6 = very severe), whether they considered themselves a victim of this harmdoing (0 = not at all to 6 = very much; or not applicable), how difficult it had been to think of a situation in which their country had inflicted harm (0 = not at all difficult to 6 = very difficult), and to what extent they felt that their country was responsible for the harm inflicted (three items, e.g., 'To what extent do you think your country is responsible for this', 0 = not at all to 6 = very much). The descriptives for these measures can be found Table 3.

To control for country level differences in the extent to which the broader political system and structures afford more room for critical voices, we relied on the country scores on the voice

and accountability index from the World Bank (Kaufman & Kraay, 2021). This index captures the extent to which there is democracy and freedom of press and expression in a country. It is highly correlated with other indices that are relevant in this regard, such as the rule of law index from the World Bank ($r = .79$), and the democracy index from the Polity5 project ($r = .83$) (Marshall et al., 2019). It hence serves as a good proxy of the extent to which the political context in a country affords a more critical reflection on the past. Countries that were higher on honor, had a lower voice and accountability score ($r = -.69$) whereas countries with a stronger collective sense of perpetratorhood had a higher score on this index ($r = .51$). The country means for these measures are also displayed in Table 3.

Results

Analytic strategy

We estimated multilevel models (in HLM8), whereby attitudes toward state apologies in general and by one's own country were nested within persons, who in turn were nested into countries. Following our expectations, we first examined whether there is a difference in how people across the different countries evaluate state apologies for human rights violations at a more abstract level and by their own state. For this, we included a contrast-code at Level 1 to indicate the difference in people's attitudes toward state apologies in general (-1) and by their own country (1).

We then proceeded to estimate whether this difference would (in accordance with our expectations) indeed be larger in countries with stronger honor and face norms and a stronger sense of perceived victimhood rather than perpetratorhood, by estimating so-called cross-level interactions (e.g., Nezlek, 2011; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). These interactions are sometimes also called moderated relationships or 'slopes as outcomes' because slopes from Level 1 (in our case: the slope representing the difference in people's support for state apologies in general and by their own country) become (conceptually) outcome variables at (in our case) Level 2 and Level 3. In our final model, we entered the country-level scores on our key predictors at Level 3 (the aggregated difference scores for the perceived victimhood and perpetratorhood scale, and the aggregated perceived honor and face norms) for both the intercept and the slope, whereby we also added the individual-level scores on these measures at Level 2 to be able to disentangle country-level effects from individual-level effects. Given that we wanted to control for a number

of potential confounds as well, we entered the various individual-level control variables at Level 2 and the country-level control variable (voice and accountability) at Level 3 (for both the intercept and slope as well) prior to estimating our final model. For this, we used a forward stepping approach whereby we deleted those variables that were not significant (also in line with recommendations for multilevel modeling, see Nezlek, 2011).

In all these analyses, we centered continuous Level-2 and Level-3 predictors around their grand mean and we entered dummy and contrast-coded variables uncentered. The intercepts were set as random, and we also included a random slope for the apology contrast variable at level one. We included the random error terms for all subsequent predictors as well but fixed these when they were not significant.

Differences in Support for State Apologies in General and by Own Country

Overall, our data show that people are indeed less inclined to support an apology by their own country when compared to their support for the more abstract idea that states in general should apologize for past harmdoing (see Table 4, Model 1, $\pi = -.18$, $p < .001$). As can be seen from the difference scores in Figure 1, there is also considerable cross-country variation in this regard (for more details, see *SI Appendix*, Figure S1). For example, the discrepancy is relatively large in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, Serbia, and Uganda, and much smaller in countries such as South Korea, the Netherlands, and Japan, with Germany being the only country where there is even a (very) small positive difference.

In line with our expectations, we also found that this discrepancy was moderated by the shared beliefs and norms in a country. Our results indicate that at the national level, a stronger collective belief that the country has been a victim rather than a perpetrator of harmdoing seems to make people more defensive about apologies by their own country (see Table 4, Model 4). More specifically, we found that this was associated with a larger difference in people's support for the notion that states in general should apologize for past harmdoing and that their own country should do this ($\gamma = .053$, $p = .010$). Table 5 presents the predicted scores for countries higher and lower on the belief that the country has been a victim more than a perpetrator of past harm. As can be seen in this table as well, a similar pattern was found at the individual level ($\beta = -.020$, $p < .001$).

Our results also indicate that – as expected – stronger honor norms in a country are associated with more defensive attitudes toward apologies by one's own country as well. Here too, we found that these norms were associated with a larger difference in people's support for the more abstract idea of state apologies and for apologies by their own state ($\gamma = -.12$, $p = .003$). We found no evidence, however, that face norms in a country moderated this difference ($\gamma = -.031$, $p = .25$), although they were associated with a tendency to be more defensive about apologies by one's own country at the individual level ($\beta = -.019$, $p = .001$). For honor norms, we found a similar pattern at the individual level ($\beta = -.020$, $p < .001$). Table 5 also displays the predicted scores for countries and individuals higher and lower on honor norms.

Interestingly, we did not find that people's tendency to be more defensive about apologies by their own country was moderated by the country scores on the voice and accountability index, which we had included to control for the possibility that in some countries, the broader political context may also not afford a more critical reflection on the past (see Table 4, Model 3).[1] In addition, our results show that most of the individual-level control variables that we had included (such as people's identification with their country or the situational factors related to the specific harmdoing participants had in mind) were not associated with a stronger tendency to be more defensive about apologies by one's own country either (see Table 4, Model 2).

Conclusion and Discussion

The inability to bring groups together following large-scale injustices and human rights violations is one of the primary obstacles to sustainable peace. It is hence crucial to find ways that may help people – to the extent possible – to move beyond the pain, anger, and grudge that often result from past harm inflicted by groups or states, and that may open up possibilities for a dialogue. State apologies are one such potential avenue, but they are certainly not a panacea and have also not been embraced equally by countries around the world. Our findings from across 33 countries help explain why this is so, and why state apologies are or can be more controversial in some contexts than in others. They show that, while on average people consider apologies by states for past human rights violations to be reasonably important, they tend to be less supportive

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[1] In an additional set of analyses (not reported in Table 4) we also did not find that the country scores on the rule of law index from the World Bank and the Polity5 democracy and autocracy indices played a role in this regard (γ's < .018, p's > .23).

of the idea that their own country should apologize for harm inflicted in the (recent) past. This tendency is, however, amplified in countries with a stronger collective sense of victim- rather than perpetratorhood and in countries with stronger honor norms.

Moving beyond the decontextualized approach that has been dominant in much of the psychological research on this topic and including countries and samples that have been underrepresented in previous research, our findings provide support for the idea that people's attitudes toward apologies by their country do not exist in a cultural and social vacuum but depend on the extent to which the broader context affords a more critical approach toward or reflection on past harmdoing. This may be more difficult when there is a shared belief or narrative that the country has been a victim rather than a perpetrator of harm as this may allow people, even if they do recognize certain harmdoing, to engage in various disengagement or denial strategies that can help them maintain a positive image of their country. But this may also be less evident in countries with stronger honor norms, where a public admission of harmdoing can run counter to an overall desire to protect the reputation of the country, and where apologies may be seen as a sign of weakness as well (e.g., Lin et al., 2022). It is possible that collective face norms are less relevant in this regard because they may not be associated with a (collective) need to display an image of strength (e.g., Smith et al., 2017). Nevertheless, we did find that at the individual level, people's perceptions of the face norms in their country were associated with less support for apologies by their own country. We are not entirely sure why we only found this effect at the individual level, but it could also be due to the relatively strong correlation between honor and face norms in some countries. For example, in an additional set of analyses (not reported in this article) in which we only included face norms, they were significant at the .10 level (γ = -0.061, p = .058).

Taken together, our findings suggest that that it is important to expand the social identity approach that has often been used in previous psychological research on state harmdoing and apologies, and to consider how socially shared norms and beliefs (including how the past is represented) shape people's reactions to collective wrongdoing (e.g., Cohen, 2001; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Sutton & Norgaard, 2013). Particularly relevant in this regard as well, is that we did not find that a stronger national identification – which we added as a control variable in our analyses – was associated with a more defensive attitude toward apologies by one's own country.

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Interestingly, our findings also suggest that the sociocultural context is more influential in shaping people's tendency to be less supportive of apologies by their own state than the political context. For example, we did not find that in countries that are more democratic and where there is more freedom of expression (as indicated by the World Bank voice and accountability index) people were less defensive about apologies by their own state. This is remarkable, as these countries are likely to provide more space to critically reflect on the past, and have also offered relatively many apologies (e.g., Schaafsma & Zoodsma, 2021; Zoodsma & Schaafsma, 2022). We did, however, find that a higher score on the voice and accountability index was associated with a lower collective sense of victimhood and a higher sense of perpetratorhood. While this may also accurately reflect the historical facts in these countries, it is possible that the political institutions and structures mostly influence people's attitudes toward apologies indirectly, by creating and sustaining specific national discourses or narratives about past wrongs by the state.

We believe that, by focusing on the difference in people's support for apologies by countries in general and by their own state, we have been able to capture cross-national differences in the extent to which people are more defensive about apologies for harmdoing by their own country. It is important to keep in mind, however, that – even though we were able to include a relatively large number of countries – the number of observations at the country level is still relatively small. Moreover, one could argue that people may have been more defensive about the idea that their own country should apologize, simply because they were thinking about an actual situation about which they had more information, which allowed them to have a more nuanced point of view. In addition, the specific social, cultural, and political context may also have made it more difficult for people in some countries to come up with or report a situation in which their country has inflicted harm than in others or may have influenced the kind of harmdoing that they had in mind. We did, however, control for many of such potential confounds in our analyses and we believe that by doing so, we have been able to take an important part of these concerns into account. Nevertheless, because we relied on a survey, we were obviously not able to delve deeply into how people construed the specific harmdoing they had in mind, and into the specific strategies that they may have relied upon to minimize the need for an apology by their country. For this, more qualitative research is necessary, and we think it

is important that such research also focuses on how – across different sociocultural contexts – these construals and strategies are produced and shared in interaction with other people.

The emergence of state apologies as a way to deal with past atrocities marks an important shift in the world polity since the end of the Cold War, with a growing number of countries publicly recognizing and expressing remorse for injustices and harm inflicted within or beyond their borders. Nevertheless, despite being seen as a key mechanism to 'face' the past, state apologies are often contested. While this can be considered as an inevitable part of recognition processes, this may also interfere with or undermine efforts to address past harmdoing. Our findings reveal an interesting tension here, whereby people across a wide range of countries seem amenable to the notion of state apologies in general and may hence even expect apologies from other countries, but simultaneously are more reluctant to embrace an apology by their own country. Future research should delve more deeply into the cultural, social, but also political and geopolitical dynamics that may make the recognition of harm by one's country more difficult, and how this impacts people's attitudes toward a broader range of potential mechanisms to address or redress human rights violations as well.

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Table 1. Participant demographics and national identification, and county descriptives.

	Individual-level							Country-level		
	Women	Age		Education		National identification		Voice and Accountability[a]	Rule of Law[a]	Democracy index[b]
	%	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	M	M
Argentina	49.3	38.35	12.23	2.32	0.59	5.17	1.31	0.59	-0.47	9
Australia	51.9	46.23	14.73	2.24	0.74	5.28	1.17	1.30	1.65	10
Burkina Faso	49.7	45.07	16.98	1.78	0.88	4.82	1.24	-0.17	-0.42	7
Canada	50.5	47.50	16.17	2.21	0.53	5.39	0.99	1.48	1.66	10
Chile	53.0	39.50	14.19	2.66	0.53	5.21	1.26	1.02	1.07	10
China	59.0	36.86	10.22	2.74	0.52	5.43	0.97	-1.65	-0.06	0
Colombia	49.5	34.05	12.78	2.39	0.58	4.85	1.56	0.15	-0.49	7
Costa Rica	47.2	30.74	10.27	2.37	0.64	5.36	1.19	1.14	0.57	10
El Salvador	52.8	29.29	8.88	2.57	0.55	5.33	1.33	0.04	-0.76	8
France	53.4	47.87	15.00	2.21	0.74	5.10	1.15	1.07	1.33	10
Germany	49.3	50.13	15.94	2.06	0.82	4.94	1.35	1.38	1.56	10
India	50.0	34.29	11.59	2.62	0.58	5.61	1.10	0.15	-0.02	9
Indonesia	49.3	35.91	11.86	2.40	0.66	5.55	0.99	0.10	-0.34	9
Ivory Coast	39.7	27.76	9.05	2.26	0.85	4.95	1.84	-0.48	-0.60	5
Japan	49.4	48.25	14.95	1.68	0.51	5.66	0.96	0.99	1.53	10
Jordan	38.9	29.20	9.04	2.71	0.53	4.66	1.51	-0.75	0.21	2
Kazakhstan	49.2	32.94	10.48	2.51	0.71	4.46	1.72	-1.19	-0.40	0
Kenya	48.4	29.16	7.46	2.51	0.54	5.72	0.85	-0.34	-0.56	9
Morocco	49.4	30.19	9.88	2.58	0.68	4.74	1.74	-0.61	-0.09	1
Netherlands	49.2	48.63	16.75	2.25	0.79	5.17	1.08	1.53	1.76	10
New Zealand	49.7	49.88	15.70	2.21	0.67	5.30	1.18	1.60	1.88	10
Nigeria	47.3	29.82	8.15	2.74	0.52	5.60	1.00	-0.59	-0.81	8
Pakistan	49.5	28.87	8.21	2.72	0.47	5.84	0.64	-0.88	-0.69	7
Philippines	51.4	32.80	10.95	2.68	0.55	5.51	1.24	-0.10	-0.55	8
Poland	52.7	42.00	15.10	2.23	0.72	5.42	1.00	0.62	0.54	10
Russia	50.3	46.42	11.85	2.04	0.20	5.47	0.86	-1.08	-0.76	5
Saudi Arabia	54.0	32.18	6.64	2.73	0.52	5.43	1.04	-1.61	0.24	0
Serbia	50.6	37.04	12.10	2.48	0.52	4.74	1.43	-0.12	-0.18	9
South Korea	52.2	42.66	13.50	2.56	0.57	5.61	0.86	0.82	1.18	8
Spain	49.6	44.58	15.03	2.28	0.62	4.90	1.55	1.01	0.90	10
Uganda	49.7	28.26	8.06	2.35	0.67	5.49	1.19	-0.72	-0.33	1
United Kingdom	50.9	50.71	15.99	1.97	0.77	5.09	1.39	1.25	1.50	8
United States	51.9	49.08	16.68	2.17	0.82	5.54	1.07	0.87	1.37	

[a] Based on the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators (Kaufman & Kraay, 2021). [b] Based on data from the Polity5 Project (Marshall et al., 2019). Rule of law and democracy index not included in reported analyses because of high correlation with voice and accountability index.

Table 2. Country means and standard deviations on key predictors.

	Honor		Face		Victimhood		Perpetratorhood	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Argentina	4.44	1.54	4.43	1.61	3.95	1.66	2.71	1.72
Australia	4.24	1.43	4.06	1.47	2.95	1.65	2.60	1.76
Burkina Faso	5.06	1.16	5.18	1.25	4.04	1.55	2.51	1.59
Canada	4.12	1.43	4.16	1.33	2.63	1.56	2.63	1.64
Chile	4.55	1.35	4.46	1.57	3.35	1.62	2.89	1.65
China[a]	4.61	1.17	4.49	1.20	4.33	1.21	2.99	1.58
Colombia	4.52	1.42	4.61	1.53	3.72	1.49	2.87	1.63
Costa Rica	4.66	1.43	4.87	1.44	3.21	1.72	1.54	1.62
El Salvador	4.73	1.50	4.85	1.44	3.59	1.70	2.32	1.73
France	4.28	1.27	4.14	1.40	3.85	1.25	3.63	1.39
Germany	3.65	1.71	3.02	1.67	2.93	1.51	3.92	1.60
India	4.43	1.55	4.62	1.52	3.71	1.57	2.65	2.11
Indonesia	5.12	1.29	5.35	1.09	3.73	1.50	2.27	1.64
Ivory Coast	4.61	1.73	4.74	1.70	3.92	1.91	1.89	1.89
Japan	3.84	1.36	4.07	1.39	3.25	1.11	3.17	1.21
Jordan	5.39	1.19	3.96	1.54	3.32	1.89	1.11	1.48
Kazakhstan	4.31	1.41	4.10	1.46	3.08	1.66	2.32	1.80
Kenya	4.77	1.43	4.42	1.56	2.93	1.75	1.91	1.70
Morocco	4.97	1.46	4.22	1.61	3.60	1.88	1.33	1.56
Netherlands	3.59	1.39	2.96	1.44	3.23	1.35	3.32	1.29
New Zealand	3.89	1.43	3.95	1.43	2.57	1.79	2.06	1.72
Nigeria	4.63	1.59	4.52	1.53	3.05	1.82	2.08	1.72
Pakistan	4.84	1.55	4.05	1.73	3.91	1.63	1.43	1.49
Philippines	4.87	1.29	5.06	1.21	3.91	1.56	2.20	1.83
Poland	4.48	1.52	3.82	1.47	4.63	1.25	2.48	1.49
Russia	4.50	1.46	3.67	1.26	4.23	1.37	2.61	1.60
Saudi Arabia	5.36	1.14	4.75	1.36	3.04	1.92	2.16	2.03
Serbia	4.53	1.55	3.55	1.67	4.71	1.38	2.83	1.67
South Korea	3.94	1.22	4.08	1.23	4.38	1.31	3.00	1.54
Spain	4.35	1.47	4.39	1.49	3.29	1.42	3.34	1.53
Uganda	4.65	1.60	4.49	1.62	2.93	1.99	2.26	1.88
United Kingdom	3.95	1.39	3.72	1.55	3.11	1.61	3.56	1.57
United States	4.43	1.42	3.84	1.61	3.03	1.68	3.42	1.76

[a] Means and standard deviations on the perceived victimhood measure for China based on the scores of two items only.

Table 3. Control variables describing the specific harmdoing participants had in mind.

|	Personal victim harmdoing		Severity harmdoing		Location harmdoing: in own country	Time harmdoing: during lifetime	Difficulty coming up with harmdoing		Actual harmdoing in mind	Country responsibility harmdoing	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	%	%	*M*	*SD*	%	*M*	*SD*
Argentina	2.42	2.30	5.11	1.29	72.4	64.6	2.98	1.94	91.4	4.11	1.60
Australia	1.32	1.89	3.95	1.57	56.8	49.7	2.74	2.02	84.3	3.14	1.60
Burkina Faso	2.76	2.19	4.41	1.52	45.5	88.6	2.32	1.77	96.2	2.66	1.63
Canada	1.07	1.77	4.51	1.49	75.4	46.4	2.29	1.94	90.9	3.42	1.62
Chile	2.31	2.18	4.76	1.47	72.0	63.9	2.73	1.96	95.1	3.50	1.61
China	2.90	2.03	4.12	1.28	39.8	43.5	3.37	1.56	76.2	3.46	1.37
Colombia	3.01	2.31	4.91	1.47	76.0	77.5	3.53	1.88	98.4	3.77	1.62
Costa Rica	1.98	2.32	4.14	1.75	61.0	72.7	2.83	2.03	89.6	2.93	1.90
El Salvador	2.66	2.28	4.93	1.45	73.2	51.6	3.02	2.00	96.0	3.35	1.79
France	1.60	2.00	4.24	1.36	41.1	44.9	2.75	1.79	90.2	3.53	1.41
Germany	1.72	2.04	4.58	1.55	45.8	36.5	2.63	1.84	86.3	3.72	1.49
India	2.64	2.36	4.28	1.64	64.0	74.4	3.99	1.73	85.4	3.13	1.91
Indonesia	2.63	2.03	4.04	1.47	59.6	80.0	3.60	1.63	85.4	3.79	1.67
Ivory Coast	3.06	2.48	4.62	1.71	76.6	73.4	4.04	2.01	90.0	2.95	2.04
Japan	1.77	1.84	3.60	1.40	56.2	38.8	2.96	1.60	82.0	3.41	1.28
Jordan	2.37	2.37	3.91	1.89	45.8	68.5	2.80	1.98	81.0	2.76	1.99
Kazakhstan	2.20	1.96	3.61	1.63	38.8	69.5	3.20	1.71	89.5	3.05	1.56
Kenya	3.06	2.34	4.98	1.33	68.8	89.9	3.35	2.23	90.8	3.94	1.75
Morocco	1.85	2.26	3.41	2.01	55.7	60.6	2.90	2.10	72.3	2.69	2.02
Netherlands	1.14	1.74	4.05	1.43	36.1	35.5	2.04	1.80	81.3	3.31	1.37
New Zealand	1.44	2.07	4.09	1.58	60.8	41.7	2.29	2.02	86.6	3.23	1.74
Nigeria	3.06	2.43	5.12	1.25	78.7	73.9	3.40	2.28	97.9	4.26	1.73
Pakistan	2.02	2.12	4.04	1.66	50.8	70.2	3.57	1.80	79.8	2.32	1.80
Philippines	2.71	2.23	4.15	1.58	64.0	69.8	3.70	1.88	87.1	3.65	1.79
Poland	1.80	2.10	4.49	1.61	58.8	42.7	3.56	1.97	88.4	3.43	1.58
Russia	1.93	2.05	4.61	1.46	47.9	54.3	2.77	1.82	71.3	3.40	1.69
Saudi Arabia	2.12	2.09	3.37	1.94	42.5	77.3	2.94	1.98	44.2	2.76	1.93
Serbia	2.29	2.27	4.96	1.33	43.4	70.9	3.83	1.81	90.2	3.10	1.75
South Korea	2.24	1.97	4.29	1.37	36.2	39.2	3.22	1.61	86.1	3.75	1.33
Spain	1.97	2.16	4.46	1.53	50.6	44.4	2.43	2.00	89.4	3.34	1.64
Uganda	2.67	2.50	4.89	1.48	72.8	77.5	3.89	2.17	95.6	3.82	1.88
United Kingdom	1.09	1.75	4.23	1.49	25.6	45.3	2.42	2.04	87.8	3.38	1.57
United States	1.66	2.16	4.36	1.58	46.6	59.2	2.43	2.03	84.8	3.31	1.74
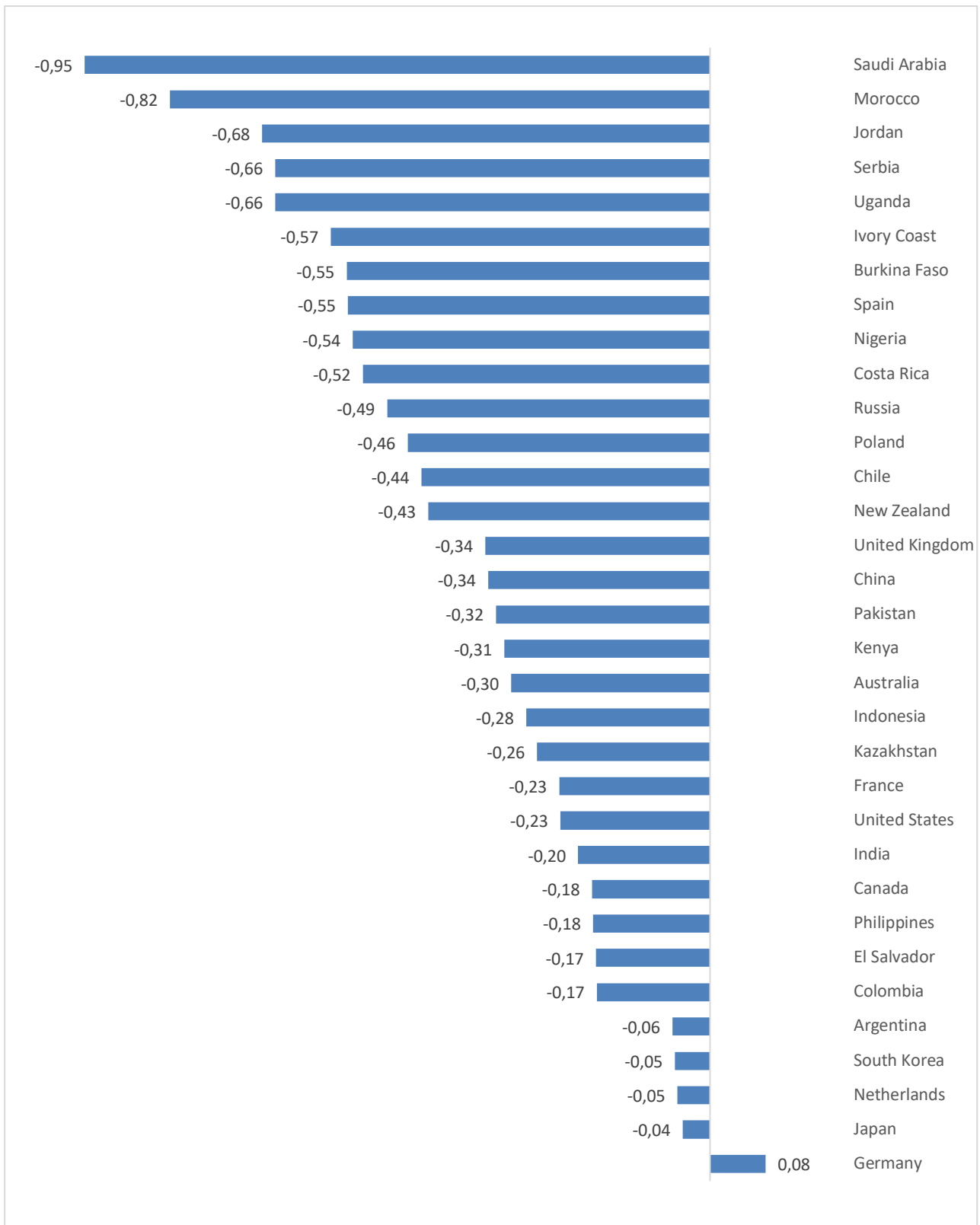
Figure 1. Mean difference in support for state apologies in general and by own country.

Table 4. Multilevel models predicting difference in support for state apologies in general and by own country.

	Model 1 β	Model 1 SE	Model 2 β	Model 2 SE	Model 3 β	Model 3 SE	Model 4 β	Model 4 SE
Intercept	3.983	0.049***	3.915	0.067***	3.922	0.044***	3.884	0.038***
Individual-level effects								
Gender			0.041	0.021	0.042	0.022	0.054	0.023*
Age			0.005	0.001**	0.005	0.001**	0.005	0.001***
Education (low is reference)								
Medium			0.062	0.034	0.046	0.031	0.047	0.030
High			0.105	0.043*	0.097	0.042*	0.102	0.039*
National identification			0.070	0.012***	0.070	0.011***	0.032	0.012*
Severity harmdoing			0.177	0.013***	0.181	0.012***	0.170	0.012***
Location harmdoing			-0.019	0.021				
Time harmdoing			-0.019	0.019				
Personal victim harmdoing			-0.014	0.006*	-0.016	0.006**	-0.015	0.006*
Difficulty imagining harmdoing			0.031	0.008**	0.032	0.008***	0.027	0.007**
Actual harmdoing in mind			0.027	0.045				
Responsibility country harmdoing			0.310	0.022***	0.308	0.022***	0.303	0.020***
Honor norms							0.062	0.010***
Face norms							0.096	0.010***
Victim- vs. perpetratorhood							0.013	0.012
Country-level effects								
Voice and Accountability					0.052	0.020*	0.060	0.019**
Honor norms							-0.036	0.065
Face norms							0.057	0.040
Victim- vs. perpetratorhood							0.037	0.026
Cross-level interactions								
Difference apology general-country (DIF)	-0.178	0.020***	-0.260	0.042***	-0.235	0.035***	-0.217	0.035***
Individual-level effects								
DIF * Gender			0.001	0.016				
DIF * Age			0.000	0.001				
Education (low is reference)								
DIF * Medium			0.022	0.025				
DIF * High			0.023	0.028				
DIF * National identification			-0.013	0.007				
DIF * Severity harmdoing			0.031	0.006***	0.031	0.007***	0.036	0.006***
DIF * Location harmdoing			0.019	0.014				
DIF * Time harmdoing			0.004	0.015				
DIF * Personal victim harmdoing			-0.004	0.003				
DIF * Difficulty imagining harmdoing			0.005	0.005				
DIF * Actual harmdoing in mind			0.072	0.031*	0.079	0.031*	0.058	0.030
DIF * Responsibility country harmdoing			0.085	0.008***	0.086	0.009***	0.082	0.008***
DIF * Honor norms							-0.020	0.006***
DIF * Face norms							-0.019	0.006**
DIF * Victim- vs. perpetratorhood							-0.022	0.005***
Country-level effects								
DIF * Voice and Accountability					0.018	0.015		
DIF * Honor norms							-0.122	0.038**
DIF * Face norms							0.031	0.026
DIF * Victim- vs. perpetratorhood							0.053	0.019*
Fit indices								
AIC		74,535.3		70,693.2		71,223.7		70,788.0
BIC		74,553.6		70,912.2		71,375.8		71,009.0
Log likelihood		-37,258,7		-35,238.6		-35,536.9		-35,285.0
Deviance		74,517.3		70,477.2		71,073.7		70,570.0
Model Comparison	With Model 0		With Model 1		With Model 2		With Model 3	
-2LogL (Deviance)		1628.9***		4040.1**		-596.5		503.7***
Number of estimators		9		108		75		109

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$. DIF = Difference in people's evaluation of state apologies in general and by own country (contrast code, 1 = own country, uncentered). At level 2 and 3, continuous predictors were entered grand-mean centered and dummy-coded predictors were entered uncentered. These were gender (1 = female), educational level (1 = low), time of harmdoing (1 = within lifetime participant), location harmdoing (1 = within own country), and actual harmdoing in mind (1 = yes). AIC = Akaike information criterion. BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

Table 5. Predicted difference in support for state apologies in general and by own country for countries and individuals low and high[a] on key predictors.

	- 1 *SD*	+ 1 *SD*
Country		
Honor	-0.17	-0.27
Face	ns	ns
Victim vs. perpetratorhood	-0.04	-0.18
Individual		
Honor	-0.19	-0.25
Face	-0.19	-0.25
Victim vs. perpetratorhood	-0.18	-0.26

[a] +/- 1 SD of country-level and individual-level mean respectively.