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# How Do Acts of Penance Influence Intergroup Forgiveness?

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## Abstract

In the current paper the problems of penance and remorse in intergroup relations, as well as their influence on forgiveness are investigated. We argue that repent can be expressed in multiple ways, which vary in their effectiveness, because of differences in evaluation of their genuineness. Results obtained in an experimental study conducted among 271 Polish students suggest that indeed act of penance alone has no direct influence on willingness to forgive. On the other hand, genuineness of the outgroup conciliatory actions and remorse facilitates forgiveness. Also, it is shown that acts of penance, as well as outgroup remorse may break a negative relationship between magnitude of ingroup harm and intergroup forgiveness.

## Introduction

Since the end of the 20th century numerous groups have apologized to their historical victims (*e.g.* Oliner, 2008). This is a manifestation of a belief that all guilty of transgressions, including groups, should show remorse. However, it is not confirmed that acts of penance indeed help to promote intergroup forgiveness: even though, in some cases, such actions are welcome, in other they are not (*e.g.* Barkan, 2000). Psychological research also shows that apology does not always succeed in facilitating reconciliation (*e.g.* Brown, Wohl, & Exline, 2008, Giner-Sorolla, Castano, Espinosa, & Brown, 2008, Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). Philpot and Hornsey (2011) suggest that the knowledge about an act of penance itself does not correlate with intergroup forgiveness. It is the perception of the apology genuineness that helps to reconcile with the other group. Also, positive evaluation of remorse of the offender group fosters forgiveness. In the current study, we use an experimental design to replicate the results in context of a different intergroup aggression (German war crimes of World War 2), as well as check, if the effect is similar for other acts of penance. Also, we investigate the role of the perceived ingroup harm in the reconciliation process.

### Apology and intergroup forgiveness

Since our childhood we are taught that after violating moral norms, we should show remorse, even little children are convinced that apology should appear after a transgression (Darby, & Schlenker, 1989). This belief became popular also in context of intergroup conflicts (Barkan & Karn, 2006; Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Lazare, 2004; Minow, 2002; Staub, 2005; Tavuchis, 1991), and therefore are commonplace in contemporary intergroup relations (Brooks, 1999, Oliner, 2008), but sometimes apologies fail to foster forgiveness (*e.g.* Barkan, 2000, Philpot & Hornsey, 2008).

Brown, Wohl, and Exline (2008) conducted a study after Americans killed Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan, and obtained positive relationship between apology and intergroup forgiveness. This is an optimistic result, but we cannot forget about the context used as a base for the research: it refers to an accident, so there is a rather low probability of situation repetition. What is more, the situation concerns two groups, who have otherwise positive relations, which means that levels of intergroup trust are rather high. Therefore, the apology may fulfill its two purposes: symbolically it repairs the harm (see Tavuchis, 1991), and ensures security of the victims (Scher & Darley, 1997).

This second purpose of act of penance explains, why it is so important for them and for remorse of the transgressing party to be genuine. Only if the aggressors regret what they have done, they will avoid harming others. Therefore it is not apology itself, but rather its genuineness, as well as perceived remorse, that influence intergroup forgiveness (Philpot & Hornsey, 2011).

### **Effectiveness of acts of penance**

Although psychologists interested in intergroup reconciliation concentrate on apology and expression of negative emotions caused by groups' immoral behavior, there are numerous ways, in which penance and remorse may be shown. For example an individual or a group may accept blame, pay reparations or change behavior to a more prosocial one (Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Gonzales, Haugen, & Manning, 1994; Scher & Darley, 1997; Gold & Weiner, 2000; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Forster, & Montada, 2004; Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004). Researchers suggest that acceptance of blame is a crucial part of act of repent. Also, it is beneficial for the intergroup forgiveness if it is followed by some financial compensation, as it is supposed to ensure sincerity of the words (Darby & Schlenker, 1982, Scher & Darley, 1997). However, money alone may be seen as just clearing the conscience, which would lead to worse relations between the conflicted parties (see Zechmeister *et al.*, 2004).

In my opinion, these different acts of penance should be considered and may be of more importance for intergroup relations than wording of apologies. We think so, because people tend to misremember, if the apology even took place (Philpot & Hornsey, 2011). Therefore its' wording is known to few people and therefore has little meaning for relations between large groups, like nations.

### **Transgression and reconciliation**

In 2008 two papers described different effects of intergroup apologies (Brown *et al.*, 2008, Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). We think that there are two factors that caused the incongruence of the results. One of them is intergroup trust (see Nadler & Liviatan, 2006), the other is the offence that is a reason for the reconciliation process. Therefore we may expect that magnitude of inflicted harm impacts perception of an act of penance, and of remorse.

It comes as no surprise, the larger the harm, the harder it is to forgive (Myers, Hewstone, & Cairns, 2009), but at the same time there are numerous nations that have positive, even friendly relations despite a tragic history. According to Tavuchis (1991), apology has the power to symbolically undo wrongs. However, as shown above, acts of penance often fail to foster forgiveness. Of more importance are their genuineness and general remorse. Therefore it may be the perception of the aggressors actions that break the negative relationship between magnitude of harm and intergroup forgiveness.

## **Hypothesis**

Earlier research conducted both on individual and group level leads to a series of hypothesis concerning effectiveness of acts of penance performed by groups. When discussing acts of penance, their perception is crucial. Basing on literature about interpersonal conflicts, we may expect that combining at least two different acts of penance should be seen as the most genuine (H1). There may be some dispute as to perceived genuineness of acceptance of blame and payment of reparations. It is argued by therapists that the earlier act should be perceived as more genuine (H2), while giving money may be seen worse than lack of action (H3).

As acts of penance are supposed to be expressions of outgroup remorse, knowledge about them should lead to perceiving the transgressors as remorseful (H4). Also, the deeds genuineness influence perception of the outgroups' remorse (H5).

Based on earlier research, hypothesis concerning influence of act of penance on forgiveness cannot be formulated. It is the two discussed perceptions that seem crucial in pardoning a aggressors, so we expect intergroup forgiveness will be stronger if an act of penance is seen as genuine (H6) and remorse as greater (H7).

Although the larger the harm the harder it is to forgive (H8), acts of penance should diminish the relationship. On the other hand, literature suggests that the discussed conciliatory activity of the transgressors may have little effect. Therefore it may be its' perception and remorse that break the harm – forgiveness relationship (H9 & H10).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The study was conducted among 271 students of Warsaw University and University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Poznan. The participants were 19 to 40 years old ( $M=25,14$ ;  $SD=6,41$ ).

### **Procedure**

Participants were instructed to read a short text before answering questions concerning their perception of Polish-German relations. To trigger knowledge about different acts of penance, we used following articles:

*Acceptance of blame* – fragments of speech by the German chancellor Merkel, where she accepts responsibility of Germans for the atrocities of the Nazi era.

*Payment of reparations* – an article about the decision of the German parliament to pay reparations to former slave laborers of the 3rd Reich.

*Acceptance of blame and payment of reparations* – this text referred to the decision from the first condition, but included words of German representatives, who accepted the nation's responsibility for the fate of victims of the 3rd Reich.

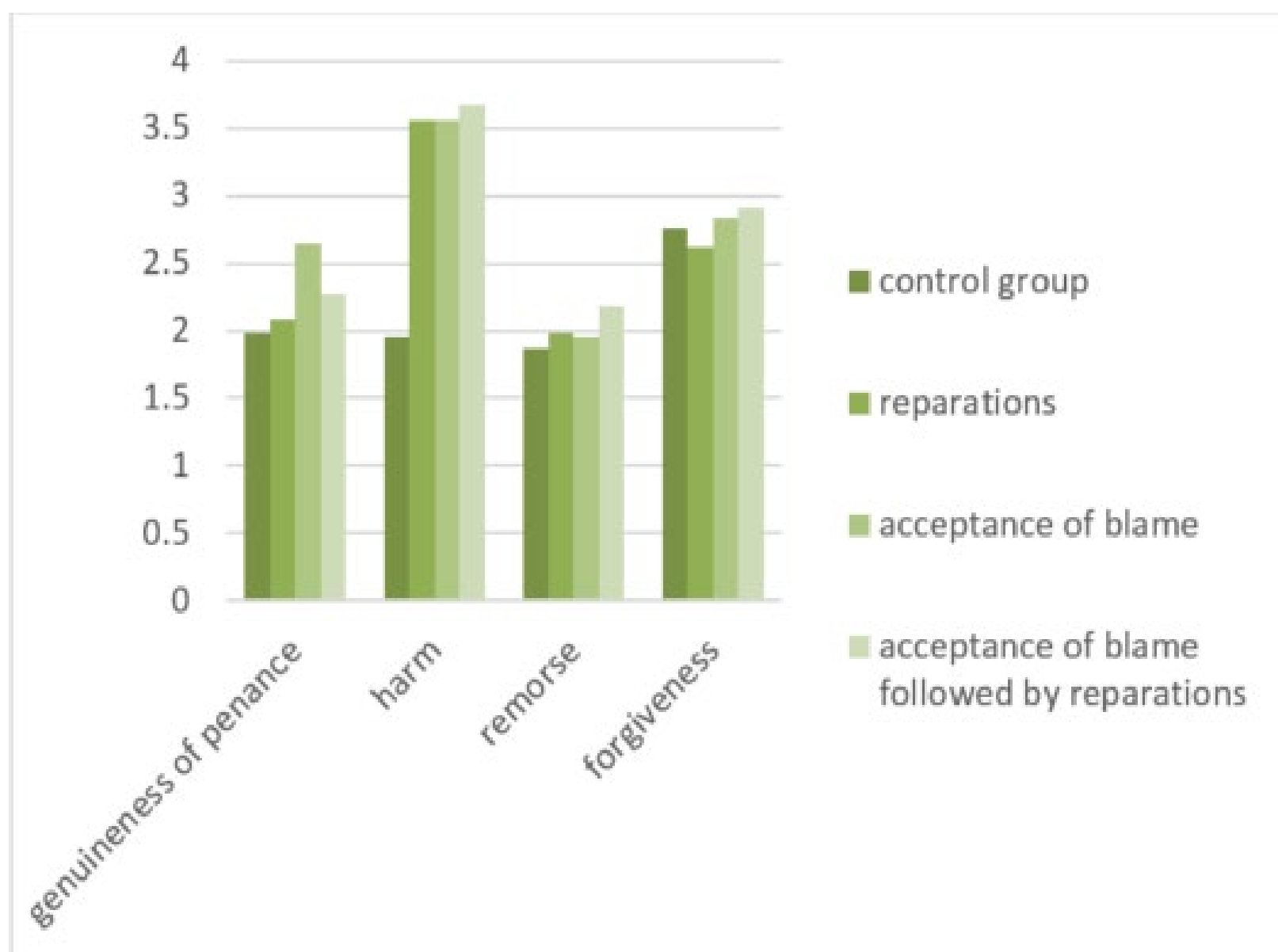
*Control group* read a text about peace treaty of Gorlitz signed by Germany and Poland in 1950.

After the manipulation, participants answered a series of questions that referred to the read text. Three items addressed problem of *genuineness of repent* ( $\alpha = .60$ ). A higher value denotes more genuine repent.

Next, participants answered questions concerning their *perception of intergroup harm* ( $\alpha = .63$ ), *outgroup remorse* ( $\alpha = .84$ ), and private intergroup *forgiveness* ( $\alpha = .90$ ) (for details see Hamer, Penczek, & Bilewicz, under review). Possible results ranged from 0 to 4, where maximum represented perception of great harm, large remorse and forgiveness.

## Results

To verify hypotheses 1 through 4, we conducted a series of ANOVA analysis, where the condition was an independent variable, while all the measured variables were dependent. As can be seen on graph 1 that summarizes results of the analysis, acceptance of blame was evaluated as more genuine than the other two acts of repent. These in turn were perceived better than a peace treaty ( $F_{3,266} = 18,85, p < .001$ ), and the three scores were above middle of the scale suggesting that all the acts of penance were seen as rather genuine. It differs from our expectations, because we hypothesized that joined acceptance of blame and payment of reparations should be evaluated higher than acceptance alone, which was not the case. Also, reparations were perceived as genuine, while we postulated negative evaluation of such actions.



**Graph 1**  
Effect of manipulation on perceptions

There were no significant differences in levels of other variables: for magnitude of harm  $F_{3,266} = 0.53$  ( $p = .66$ ), for perceived remorse  $F_{3,265} = 2.07$  ( $p = .10$ ), and for forgiveness  $F_{3,266} = 1.08$  ( $p = .36$ ). This suggests that indeed acts of penance themselves do not foster intergroup forgiveness.

The next 3 hypotheses concerned correlational relationships between evaluation of outgroups' act of penance and remorse, and with intergroup forgiveness. In line with my expectations, genuineness of penance and acceptance of remorse were highly positively correlated ( $r = .43$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and both of the variables were related to forgiveness ( $r = .38$ ,  $p < .001$  for genuineness of penance, and  $r = .49$ ,  $p < .001$  for remorse).

**Table 1**  
*Correlations between key variables in general group*

	Harm	Remorse	Forgiveness
Genuineness of penance	-,11	,43*	,38*
harm		-,09	-,22*
Remorse			,49*

Note:  $N = 270$ , \*  $p < .001$ .

Based on literature, we hypothesized that perception of harm would be related to perception of outgroup remorse, as well as to intergroup forgiveness. Only the last hypothesis was confirmed, and relationship between harm and forgiveness was negative ( $r = -.22$ ,  $p < .001$ , see Table 1).

The last problem we were interested in, concerned the relationship between per-

ceived ingroup harm and intergroup forgiveness. As expected, these two variables were negatively correlated ( $r = -.22, p < .001$ ). However, differences between conditions appeared: in the control group the relationship was highest ( $r = -.41; p < .01$ ), while in the other groups it was not statistically significant. This shows that act of penance itself may modify relationship between perception of ingroup harm and intergroup forgiveness.

We expected that perception of outgroup behavior would moderate the harm-forgiveness relationship. In order to verify these hypothesis, a moderation analysis using procedure by Hayes (2012) was conducted. Its results suggest that genuineness of penance is not a significant moderator of the relationship between perception of ingroup harm and intergroup forgiveness ( $\Delta R^2 = .004, F_{1,265} = 1.34, p = .25$ ). However, remorse of the outgroup moderates the discussed relationship between a transgression and willingness to forgive ( $\Delta R^2 = .02, F_{1,265} = 6.89, p = .01$ ).

## Discussion

In the current paper we discuss a problem of influence of acts of penance and remorse shown by a group on willingness to forgive them by a victimized group. Thus far researchers were interested in apology alone and failed to consistently show its positive effect. We argue that there are three crucial points that need to be considered: nature of transgression, nature and perception of post-conflict behavior of the guilty group.

Results obtained in the study confirm findings of Philpot and Hornsey (2011) that the evaluation of the act of penance rather than the act itself fosters forgiveness. Also, we show that the effect holds true for other conciliatory actions of the offending party. These results stand in line with knowledge about interpersonal relations, where genuine remorse that manifests itself through acceptance of blame and other conciliatory behaviors is the key to forgiveness.

Perception of the acts of penance that we used for manipulation differed slightly from what we expected. The two situations, where blame was accepted, were seen as most genuine, but also reparations were positively evaluated. The surprising effect may be due to the context of my research: the reconciliation process between Poles and Germans begun over 20 years ago and the two nations have currently rather friendly relations, which are probably known to all students. Therefore there may be relatively high levels of trust toward the Poland's western neighbors that result in conviction about sincerity of Germans penance. However, in order to verify the speculations, an additional study has to be conducted so that outgroup remorse would be measured also before manipulation.

The other important problem that we addressed in the current paper, was relationship between perception of ingroup harm and intergroup forgiveness after an act of penance. When participants didn't read about any repent of Germans, the worse the transgression, the harder it was for them to forgive. However, any manifestations of remorse

broke the relationship. The change was even more pronounced for perception of the offenders remorse. It is not surprising, if we remember that remorse means estrangement from the immoral deed and willingness to refrain from repeating it in the future. Therefore a remorseful person is to some extent someone else than the aggressor, deprived of any ill will, and for these reasons can be trusted and may become a friend.

### Author note

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