

Collective guilt and pro-social behaviour: Implications for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous reconciliation in Australia

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Abstract

The existence of collective guilt and its influence on pro-social behaviours was investigated in the context of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous reconciliation in Australia. After the presentation of one of three (negative, positive, ambiguous) one-page Australian histories, 80 psychology undergraduates (47 females) from the Northern Territory University, aged from 18-50 years, indicated their level of national identity, perceived in-group variability, feelings of collective guilt, and how participants and the government should compensate Indigenous groups. Participants were also shown an internet petition, a 'Sorry list' apologising to Indigenous Australians, to which they could add their name. Perceptions of in-group variability, collective guilt, and out-group compensation were found to be dependent on participants' level of national identity. In order to facilitate reconciliation, the present data indicate psychographic segmentation of the Australian population, in order to tailor specific reconciliation information to these groups.

Recognition of prior negative treatment of Indigenous Australians has dominated the Australian media in recent years, and has led to a wide range of responses from the Non-Indigenous Australian public. These have ranged from a desire to compensate

and apologise to Indigenous Australians, to a complete rejection of past Non-Indigenous behaviour and blaming of the Indigenous people for their plight. Whilst Indigenous groups attempt to move Non-Indigenous groups to acknowledge accountability for this past treatment, some sectors of the community are apparently more willing than others to feel guilt and to acknowledge responsibility. Reconciliation and compensating (both financial and non-financial) for past injustices have arguably been hindered by these divisions. This study employed a systematic exploration of reactions to, and the factors that mediate, feelings of collective guilt, in an attempt to understand some of the apparent inconsistencies in reaction to the reconciliation process.

Collective guilt has received little empirical attention from the psychological community, despite its existence being accepted by writers in other disciplines (Bennett, 1999; Brunton, 1993; Steele, 1990). However, recent empirical support for the construct was found by Doosje, Branscombe, Spears and Manstead (1998). Doosje et al (1998) found that it was possible to elicit feelings of collective guilt in participants for past negative in-group behaviour, independent of personal guilt. Doosje et al (1998) also found that individual levels of identification with an in-group can mediate their feelings of guilt and degree of pro-social behaviour. Specifically, 'low' in-group identifiers felt more guilt, and acknowledged more negative past behaviour, than their 'high' identifying counterparts. These findings were supported by past research, which found that individuals who were highly nationalistic were more inclined to be highly conservative, and less receptive to social change or in-group criticism (Bonaiuto, Breakwell, & Cano, 1996).

Two major theoretical positions are useful in understanding the role that national identity plays in collective experiences of guilt: Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978), and Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner, 1985). These theories suggest that not only do individuals instinctively categorise themselves, but their behaviour and emotions can be moderated by group memberships due to a need to maintain a positive self-image (Tajfel, 1970). Moreover, individuals can react differently to group behaviour depending on the strength of their identification with the in-group.

One strategy employed by high identifying individuals, as a defence against threat to social identity, is perceived heterogeneity of in-group behaviour (Doosje et al, 1998). If individuals are presented with negative information about past in-group behaviour, they may perceive in-group behaviour as heterogeneous, thus distancing themselves from the negative implications of group membership. Doosje et al (1998) found that high levels of perceived in-group heterogeneity were strongly linked to low feelings of guilt. Thus, high identifying individuals may fail to 'own' the negative behaviour that is necessary for an individual to experience guilt.

Guilt has also been found to mediate pro-social behaviour, with increased guilt levels coupled with higher levels of pro-social behaviour, and lower levels of guilt being coupled with lower levels of pro-social behaviours (Doosje et al, 1998; Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973; Cunningham, Steinberg, & Grev, 1980). In this study, it is expected that individuals who identify strongly (versus weakly) with being Australian will perceive more in-group heterogeneity, less collective guilt for past Non-Indigenous Australian

behaviour, and have a lower desire to compensate Indigenous Australians.

Method

Participants

The participants were 80 psychology undergraduates from the Northern Territory University, aged from 18 to 50 years ($M = 27.39$). Fifty-eight percent of the participants were female, reflecting the preponderance of female students in the psychology program.

Materials

All items on the questionnaire were adapted from the Doosje et al's (1998) study. The original questions were modified by replacing the word *Dutch* with *Non-Indigenous Australian*, and the word *Indonesian* with *Indigenous Australian*. The questionnaire contained: An eight-item national identity measure ($\alpha = .94$), repeated at the end of the survey form, to assess whether presentation of the histories altered strength of national identity (one item was included to assess if participants perceived the history manipulation as 'positive,' 'negative,' or 'ambiguous'); a single item measuring previous donating frequency; a five-item collective guilt measure ($\alpha = .74$); a four-item perceived in-group variability measure ($\alpha = .69$); a five-item global compensation measure ($\alpha = .77$); and two items measuring the amount of money that an individual and the Australian government should donate to Indigenous groups. An internet site which asked participants to add their name to a national "Sorry List," to apologise to Indigenous Australians, was used as the final behavioural measure.

Following Doosje et al (1998), the one-page histories contained three paragraphs which portrayed a history that was either all negative, all positive, or ambiguous (two paragraphs positive and one negative, or one paragraph positive and two negative, both with order rotations, were constructed by the experimenter). To lend credibility to the histories, it was stated that the history was an excerpt from a reputable and well-known encyclopedia.

Procedure

Participants were given a demographics cover sheet, the first ten questions, and one of the six histories. Participants were then given the remainder of the questionnaire after completion of the first items. After completion of the final section of the questionnaire, participants were asked to view the internet site, to which they could add their name, while the experimenter left the room. After a five-minute period, the experimenter returned, and informed the participant that (s)he could leave the test room.

Results

An overall effect for histories was found, $F(5,74) = 42.86, p < .001$. Post Hoc tests revealed a significant difference between the 'positive' condition and the other conditions, as well as between the 'negative' condition and the other conditions.

'High' ($M = 6.57$) and 'Low' ($M = 4.8$) levels of identification were determined through a median split, median = 6.0. A significant multivariate effect was found for Australian Identity, Wilke's Lambda = .48, $F(7, 47) = 7.24, p < .001$. The multivariate η^2 based on Wilke's Lambda was .52. Figure 1 shows the pattern of significant correlations between the

variables. There was a moderate linkage between identity and perceived in-group variability, $r = .269, p < .05$. A highly significant one-tailed correlation was found between levels of collective guilt and global compensating intentions 'Owe,' $r = .901, p < .01$. Significant correlations were also found between collective guilt and the three specific behaviour measures: 'Government Compensation,' $r = .391, p < .01$; 'Individual Donation,' $r = .325, p < .01$; and 'Internet Apology,' $r = .247, p < .05$.

Discussion

These findings support the hypotheses. The concept of national identity appears to play a large role in individual responses to reconciliation of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australians. 'Low' identifying Australians were more willing to accept the negative nature of past Indigenous and Non-Indigenous relations. Consequently, they were also more likely to experience high levels of collective guilt and attempts at redress with respect to Indigenous groups. However, individuals who identified strongly with Australia were more likely to employ defensive strategies when faced with negative information about Australia's past treatment of Indigenous Australians. These individuals were less likely to experience guilt, and also less willing to compensate Indigenous Australians.

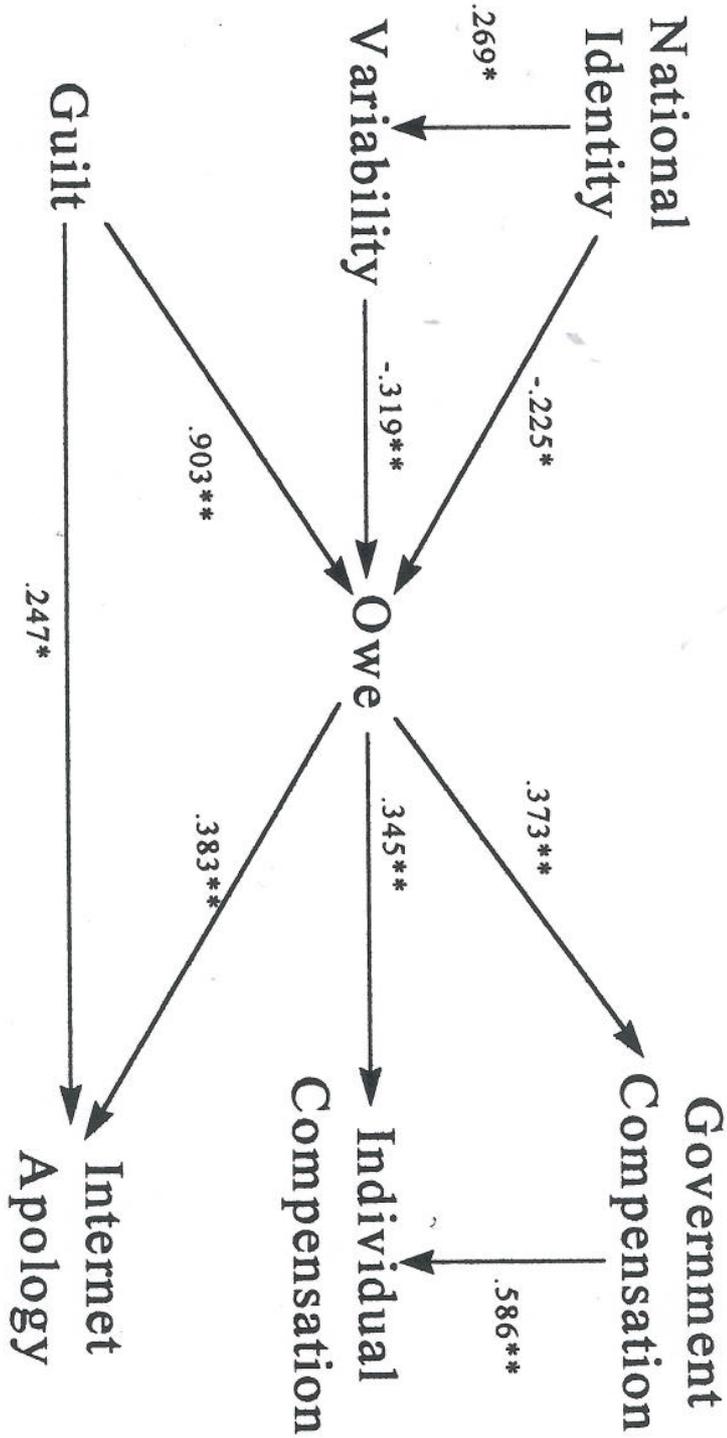


Figure 1: Schematic representation of variable interactions

Note:

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

Level of perceived in-group variability and degree of collective guilt were found to be moderated by both degree of national identity and those aspects of in-group history which were made salient (positive, negative, ambiguous). The highest level of in-group variability was perceived by 'high' identifiers, and the lowest level of in-group variability was perceived by the 'low' identifiers. Interestingly, 'high' identifiers acknowledged the inaccuracy of the all-'positive' history, indicating at least partial acknowledgement of some negative aspects of Australia's history, whilst the all 'negative' history was rejected as inaccurate by the same group. Consistent with current theories on motivational biases, the need to maintain a positive self-image may be tempered by a need for accuracy when self-image is not threatened ('positive' history), whilst the need to maintain a positive self-image is dominant when self-image is threatened ('negative' history) (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Kunda, 1990). These findings suggest that the use, or perceived use, of solely negative historical information may alienate those sectors of the community which pro-reconciliation groups are trying to inform or influence.

As found by Doosje et al (1998), two distinct affective and behavioural patterns were discovered for 'high' and low' identifying participants. These patterns illustrate why some Australians desire to compensate and apologise to Indigenous Australians, while others reject or deny the past treatment of Indigenous groups by Non-Indigenous Australians. The findings also suggest the use of psychographic segmentation of the Australian population, for the development of tailored information packages, by government and community groups who seek to successfully promote the reconciliation process.

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