REFRAMING: JULIE CAOUETTE & DONALD M. TAYLOR (2014)

Canada's Apology to Aboriginal Peoples: The Role of Expectations and Collective White Guilt

The research outlined in our original chapter explored how White mainstream Canadians react when confronted with evidence of the harmful impact of the internal colonization of Aboriginal peoples. Our specific focus was on the role of collective White guilt. A number of research programs point to collective guilt as an emotion that can be a constructive impetus for actions aimed at rectifying past collective harm, such as compensation, financial reparation and public apology (for a review, see Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006).

Dramatically, since the publication of *The Great White North* in 2007, the significance of White guilt as an issue has become salient, in the form of a public apology made to Aboriginal Canadians. On June 11, 2008, the Canadian government officially apologized for its infamous residential schools, where many Aboriginal students, living in substandard conditions, were victims of physical and emotional abuse (see Annett, 2005; Milloy, 1999). But while many Canadians were quick to applaud themselves for such a commendable act of contrition, it is worth examining the implications of the apology more closely.

In the present reframing article, we will suggest that beneath the silver lining, a public apology may, unfortunately, provide an opportunity for many mainstream Canadians to let themselves "off the responsibility hook" and safely relegate feelings of collective guilt to a more distant, and less pertinent, past (see Caouette, Wohl, & Peetz, 2012; Peetz, Gunn, & Wilson, 2010). In stark contrast, for Aboriginal peoples, a public apology may signify merely a first step in a long reconciliatory process to heal past historical wounds. That is, perpetrators and victims often perceive a public apology very differently. Perpetrator groups may view an apology as resolution and closure for past historical harm, whereas victimized groups may judge an apology as signaling the beginning of a series of actions to mend past historical harm (Wohl, Hornsey, & Philpot, 2011). These contrasting interpretations can be highly problematic for future intergroup relations.

Almost as a warning, Mary Simon (President of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami), an Aboriginal leader, offered the following comment in response to the statement of apology offered by the Ministers in the Canadian House of Commons:

> Let us not be lulled into an impression that when the sun rises tomorrow morning, the pain and scars will miraculously be gone.

D. E. Lund & P. R. Carr (Eds.), Revisiting The Great White North?, 105–107.

> They will not. But a new day has dawned, a new day heralded by a commitment to reconciliation and building a new relationship with Inuit, Métis and First Nations.

By this statement, Mary Simon is voicing the position of the victimized group. The apology does not erase the past; it is a mere starting point for future, ongoing, constructive reconciliation.

Will mainstream Canadians hear this message? Based on social psychological research, we have every reason to dampen our enthusiasm but hope that the public apology will lead to genuine healing and reconciliation. First, there is mounting research evidence to show that people who have engaged in a good moral deed (such as providing an apology) then feel somewhat liberated to engage in more immoral or unethical behaviours in the future (for a review, see Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). The rationale is that, as a consequence of performing a moral deed, a person or a group no longer needs to worry about feeling or appearing immoral. This phenomenon has been termed moral self-licensing. For example "when people are confident that their past behavior demonstrated compassion, generosity, or lack of prejudice, they are more likely to act in morally dubious ways without fear of feeling heartless, selfish, or bigoted" (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010, p. 344). In short, engaging in good, moral behaviours disinhibit people from performing subsequent negative or immoral behaviours. Recently, Effron, Cameron, and Monin (2009) confirmed this hypothesis by showing that people who had voiced support for Barack Obama (a good deed "demonstrating" their non-prejudice) just before the 2008 election felt licensed to thereafter make ambiguously racist statements. Such less-than-commendable actions were "licensed" because people no longer needed to prove their lack of prejudice.

What are the implications in terms of the impact of the federal government's apology to Aboriginal peoples? The apology may well provide mainstream Canadians the opportunity for moral self-licensing. Thus, they may be less than committed to engage in serious efforts at reconciliation, or worse, they may feel freer to engage in more prejudice and discriminatory actions. For example, after the apology, some mainstream Canadians may feel more open about voicing qualms about providing tangible reparation or compensation to Aboriginal peoples, without fear of appearing racist or heartless: after all, "didn't we just apologize to them?"

In fact, recent data related to another Canadian public apology, the Chinese Head Tax, may lend credence to such a possibility. In July of 2006, the Canadian government offered a public apology for the "head tax" placed on Chinese immigrants during the early 20th century. In a longitudinal study, Wohl, Matheson, & Branscombe (in press) were able to examine both White and Chinese Canadians' perceptions and expectations of the Canadian government's apology both before and after the public apology was formally presented in the House of Commons. Even though, initially, both White Canadians and Chinese Canadians were optimistic about the consequences of the apology, at a one year follow-up, Chinese Canadians'

willingness to forgive Canadians had waned. Also, those Chinese Canadians who assigned more collective guilt to White Canadians, that is, they strongly believed in the culpability of White Canadians (e.g., "Canadians have benefited at the expense of Chinese Canadians for generations") were especially likely to be unconvinced by the reconciliatory efforts following the apology. That is, their expectations of improved relations had not been met, and acts following the apology toward restitution were regarded as insufficient.

Were Chinese Canadians' expectations unrealistically high, or were White Canadians less than fully committed to reconciliatory efforts following the apology? We cannot answer this question yet, but it is clear that public collective apologies have a different psychological impact on perpetrators and victims. In our present context, it would be valuable to carefully research issues of expectations and collective guilt among Aboriginal peoples and White Canadians as the reconciliation process moves forward. Indeed, concrete answers to these questions are needed if the reconciliation process is to be mutually constructive.

In this reframing piece, we have considered the place of collective White guilt and collective apology in the establishment of a more harmonious relationship between Aboriginal Canadians and non-Aboriginal Canadians. Specifically, we have argued that for many mainstream Canadians, the offer of a public apology offers closure, and a chance to put behind any remaining feelings of collective guilt. However, for Aboriginal Canadians, beyond the immediate positive feelings and validation arising from having received an apology, an apology marks only the beginning of a process. The long-term consequences of this apology remain to be seen.

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