REGULAR ARTICLE

Within-group apologies can restore a sense of justice more for non-victimized observers than for victims

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Abstract

Within-group apologies are effective for governments to address injustices, but they often hesitate due to public reception concerns. With justice theory as the starting point, this study investigated the psychological effects of within-group apologies, excuses and silence between the empathetic group towards victims' experiences (i.e. victim-empathic group) and the observers (Study 1) and between the actual victims and the observers (Study 2). Findings indicate that within-group apologies restore justice and social engagement for all participants, while excuses and silence are ineffective. Victims' justice restoration was notably weaker than observers when encountering the apology (Study 2), while the victim-empathic group had similar justice restoration as observers (Study 1). Thus, within-group apologies are more effective at restoring a sense of justice for observers than victims.

KEYWORDS
a sense of justice, injustice, victims versus observers, within-group apology

1 | INTRODUCTION

It is common for group leaders, authorities, government spokespersons and presidents to officially apologize to victimized members for past or present injustices. Indeed, apologies have the psychological potential to mend injustices within a community, and they are increasingly acknowledged as a vital political tool in modern society (Zoodsma & Schaafsma, 2022). Apologies have typically drawn researchers' attention in social psychology as a social act of correcting mistakes and restoring broken relationships between individuals (Scher & Darley, 1997), as well as an important public act of correcting historical injustice committed by one country against another (for reviews, see Hornsey et al., 2015; Hornsey & Wohl, 2013). Researchers have focused on how the perpetrator country should apologize to receive forgiveness from the victim country (e.g. Berndsen et al., 2015; Goode & Smith, 2016). According to studies, addressing injustice before and after an apology requires extra effort because victim countries do not automatically forgive the perpetrator country (Hornsey et al., 2015; Wohl et al., 2011).

However, despite the importance of the situation where the government apologizes to its citizens, research on this topic has been limited (Bobowik et al., 2017). Around the world, former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologized for the history of forced head taxes on Chinese Canadians, former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologized for the wrongdoing of eliminating Aboriginal Australian culture, and Ralph Klein, former governor of Alberta, apologized for the policy of compulsory sterilization of mentally ill people (Blatz et al., 2009). With few sincere apologies in South Korea, bereaved relatives of victims from the Jeju Uprising and the Gwangju Democratic Uprising have urged the government to apologize formally (see Sagherian-Dickey et al., 2023). Within-group apologies are a research topic that requires additional attention to address societal injustices.

However, when governments apologize, things do not always turn out well. The government often directs its apology toward a specific group of people rather than all citizens (Blatz et al., 2014; Bobowik et al., 2017). If the general public does not empathize with the victims' ongoing pain (Starzyk & Ross, 2008) or affirms social inequality (Karunaratne & Laham, 2019), negative public opinion may appear that there is no need to apologize. To avoid this climate, governments soften their apology or refuse to apologize (Leunissen et al., 2014; Starzyk et al., 2009). As a result, the injustice and resulting conflict remain unresolved, and the victims' suffering persists.

This article empirically corroborates how the non-victimized observers evaluate the government's response (apologies, excuses and silence) compared to victims. To this end, we adopt the justice theory as a theoretical background to corroborate each government response's effect on restoring the group's justice. Study 1 is a preliminary investigation that examines the differences between victim-empathizers and observers, whereas Study 2 explores the differences between actual victims and observers. Based on the findings, we describe the non-victimized observers' evaluation of the government's apologies, excuses or silences.

We aim to contribute to governments' understanding of the fairest approach to addressing injustice within a group. By analysing empirical data, we recommend a response that is both fair and likely to garner widespread support.

1.1 | Within-group apologies restoring a sense of justice

Why do victims of injustice expect an apology from group authority? Scholars consider apologies to be able to meet victims' deficient needs (Nadler & Shnabel, 2015). However, victims do not prefer apologies just to meet their needs. They believe that they deserve an apology, which restores justice to the ingroup (de Cremer & Schouten, 2008; Steele & Blatz, 2014). If governments or others do not effectively remedy injustice, victims will not believe that their ingroup is fair, and members of the unfair ingroup will be unable to trust or cooperate with other members (Lind & van den Bos, 2002). As long as humans live in groups, justice is an essential motive in addition to need satisfaction (Mikula & Wenzel, 2000; Montada, 2011).

How does apologies restore ingroup's justice? As outlined in restorative justice literature (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2008; Wenzel et al., 2008), injustice not only causes a power inequality between perpetrators and victims but also violates the group's shared values. Restorative justice serves as a reminder of these violated values' importance (Wenzel & Thielmann, 2006), reintegrating both perpetrators and victims into the group

(Okimoto & Wenzel, 2008). Group authorities' apologies for injustice communicate that the harmful act was incompatible with the group's values, leading victims to perceive justice has been restored.

Studies show that group authorities' apologies can boost members' sense of restorative justice. For instance, Eugene de Kock's remorseful apology for Apartheid-era violence, as noted by Gobodo-Madikizela (2002), made victims perceive him as a fellow human with shared values, facilitating forgiveness. Another example is the study by Steele and Blatz (2014), where participants found justice restored through President Clinton's sincere apology for the U.S. government's Tuskegee syphilis experiment. In both cases, remorseful apology for injustice revealed the perpetrators' suffering from violating shared values, contributing to justice restoration.

Apologies from group authorities can also foster victims' sense of procedural justice, which is the perception of fairness when members are included in the decision-making process and treated with dignity and respect by the authority (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Several studies have investigated sincere apologies' procedural justice-restoring effect. Findings by de Cremer and Schouten (2008) reveal that victims perceive fairness only with authorities' respectful apologies, not disrespectful ones. Okimoto and Tyler (2007) discovered that, even in a scenario where monetary compensation alone suffices, adding a respectful apology increases perception of fairness, indicating that such apologies contribute to restoring procedural justice.

Within-group apologies not only restore victims' sense of procedural justice, but also foster future cooperation within the group. Respectful treatment by ingroup authorities, including sincere apologies (de Cremer & Schouten, 2008), is known to lead members to perceive decisions as fair, despite unfavourable material outcomes. Procedurally fair treatment even promotes members' perceived status and social identity (Huo et al., 2010; Tyler, 1989; see also Okimoto, 2009), increasing engagement and commitment to the group (Blader & Tyler, 2009; Tyler & Blader, 2003). Consequently, members contribute to the group's internal regulation by obeying its rules and leadership (de Cremer & van Dijke, 2009; O'Brien & Tyler, 2019).

In summary, restorative and/or procedural justice helps explain why victims of injustice demand within-group apologies and why such apologies effectively address a sense of justice. First, within-group apologies acknowledge that the group authority is suffering from injustice, reintegrating the group by reaffirming the violated values. Second, within-group apologies strengthen victims' social identity by validating their worth, which is only achievable if the apologies are offered with dignity and respect. In reality, however, many group authorities hesitate to apologize (Leunissen et al., 2014; Starzyk et al., 2009); their concern is that the non-victimized majority would be less supportive of an apology. To fully

address this issue, it is vital to investigate the discrepancies in the perspectives of victims and observers in the group.

1.2 | Non-victimized observers in a group

In most cases of historical injustice, we can clearly distinguish victims and non-victimized observers. For example, non-Chinese Canadians were exempt from the coercive head tax once levied in Canada. Only Aboriginal Australians experienced the tragedy for which former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologized. Alberta's compulsory sterilization policy for mentally ill people did not apply to residents without mental illness. In the case of South Korea's Gwangju Democratic Uprising, the people outside Gwangju suffered no harm when the military regime besieged the city and massacred civilians. Sometimes, victims have to speak out before anyone discovers the injustices committed.

When analysing injustices, it is vital to examine the victim's and observer's perspectives, according to the justice literature (Schmitt et al., 2010; Skarlicki et al., 2015). Prior research has looked into specific conditions under which observers are less supportive of apologies than victims. When the perpetrators of injustice are still in power (Bobowik et al., 2017) and have not made the promised apology (Wohl et al., 2013), observers become less optimistic about apologies than victims. For instance, Wohl et al. (2013) claim that observers are less welcoming than victims of the forthcoming promised apology. Interestingly, victims are disappointed once receiving the apology because they view it as insincere, whereas observers applaud it enthusiastically (Blatz et al., 2014).

Scholars note that observers are less responsive to ingroup injustice than victims. When people directly experience injustices, they perceive them as more serious than if they observe similar injustices happening to other ingroup members (Lind et al., 1998). For example, a study on mass layoffs found that laid-off employees felt unfairly treated despite the organization following procedural justice. Simultaneously, observers chastised victims for believing the layoff was unfair (Skarlicki et al., 1998).

On the contrary, another body of research offers evidence that through moral reasoning, observers are as perceptive as victims in detecting injustices (e.g. Folger et al., 2005). If so, what is the origin of the discrepancies in the literatures? This research series relied on detached observers without shared group membership with victims and their group authorities. Notably, Cugueró-Escofet et al. (2013) discovered that unbiased observers found it fair for top managers to apologize for organizational injustice but not fair to excuse or remain silent. While similar to our research design, our study differs from this research series by exclusively focusing on group authorities planning an apology for ingroup non-victimized observers rather than externally detached observers.

In summary, justice theory suggests that within-group apologies can be beneficial in restoring victims' justice (de Cremer & Schouten, 2008; Okimoto & Tyler, 2007). However, governments are often concerned that the majority would be less accepting of their apology (Leunissen et al., 2014; Starzyk et al., 2009). In fact, before apologizing, observers are less optimistic about within-group apologies than victims (Wohl et al., 2013), but after apologizing, they are more favourable than victims (Blatz et al., 2014). Observers may feel that respect in the apology restores justice and welcomes it; however, because of their lower awareness of ingroup injustice, they may also perceive excuses more positively than victims. If so, the group authorities, aware of the group's non-victimized observers, may offer excuses instead of apologies.

1.3 | Study overview

In addition to apologies, we assume that the government's response will include excuses and silence (Cugueró-Escofet et al., 2013), and we test how victims and observers evaluate each of the three responses. Initially, everyone will find fault if the group authority remains silent when facing demands for an apology (Cugueró-Escofet et al., 2013; Davis & Holtgraves, 1984; Ferrin et al., 2007). The interaction we seek will emerge between apologies and excuses. Both victims and observers will favour apologies, while observers will react more positively to excuses. This pattern will still appear even if observers explicitly compare the apology and the excuse.

We conducted two studies to test this interaction by having participants read hypothetical scenarios depicting a lack of justice, followed by three types of government responses (apology, excuse and silence) in random order. Afterwards, participants evaluate each response from the victim's or observer's perspective. In Study 1, which is close to a preliminary study, we divided participants into victim-empathic and observer groups. In Study 2, we compared the actual victims and observers. Study 1 explores soldier mistreatment, and Study 2 investigates police mistreatment. We chose soldiers and police officers as victims because they take significant risks and devote themselves to society. Given South Korea's cultural background, people may notice the unfair treatment of military and police officers. We additionally controlled police officers' tendency to uphold government's legitimacy by introducing a general system justification scale in Study 2 (Kay & Jost, 2003).

2 | STUDY 1

2.1 | Methods

2.1.1 | Participants

A total of 70 college students (m = 22, f = 48, M_{age} = 22.00, SD_{age} = 1.960) taking psychology-related courses at a university located in South Korea participated in Study 1. Participation in the study was voluntary without monetary or other forms of compensation. Non-Koreans were systematically filtered out before participating in the study to ensure that every participant viewed the scenario in the ingroup context.

2.1.2 | Design and materials

We used three response types (apology, excuse, silence) as within-participant variables and two evaluator types (victim-empathic group, observers) as between-participant variables. We randomly assigned participants to evaluator types, and they evaluated all response types in a random order. This design allowed us to explore how people compare different responses when expecting or assessing an apology. Individual differences can be excessive when evaluating apologies, in that some perceive the government's monetary compensation as enormous and others as ridiculously small, despite it being the same amount. That is, even if the contents of the apology are the same, it may move some, while others may perceive a lack of remorse. Using a within-participant design helps minimize evaluation criteria discrepancies between participants.

The study explores a scenario where a government official is demanded to apologize for inappropriate remarks about a soldier following an accident. The official dismisses soldiers' voices ('never mind what they say') and makes disrespectful statements ('South Korea does not need an undisciplined soldier causing such an accident')—the soldiers demand an apology for the statements (see Appendix 1). As a response, the apology condition includes the government's acknowledgement of wrongdoing, empathy for the victims and treating the victims with dignity and respect. In the excuse condition, the discourse length is similar, but the scenario omits essential characteristics (violation acknowledgement, empathy and respectful treatment) from the apology condition. Finally, there is no apology in the silence condition, instead, 'Media reports indicated that the minister was planning to apologize, but he remained silent on the matter until the end'.

2.1.3 | Measures

We asked participants, 'How much did you feel you were the victim/observer of this incident?' to confirm a psychological difference between the victim-empathic group and observers. Participants rated their level of empathy on a single item eight-point scale (1: *feeling entirely as an observer*, 8: *feeling entirely as a victim*).

Next, we employed the following tools to measure participants' responses. First, we used the sense of justice scale proposed by Wenzel and Okimoto (2010) to measure the justice restoration by each response from the authority (e.g. 'My feeling of having been unfairly treated has faded'). We used an 8-point scale with seven items (1: *strongly disagree*, 8: *strongly agree*). Although plenty of measures focus on procedural justice (Colquitt, 2001), existing scales make it impossible to measure the restoration of justice after an injustice. We determined Cronbach's alpha-computed reliability coefficient as 0.93 in all three conditions.

Additionally, we included Huo et al.'s (2010) social engagement scale as a three-item group identification scale (e.g. 'I am proud to be Korean') and a four-item group-oriented behaviour scale (e.g. 'I like to help out other Koreans'). Participants responded to each item on an 8-point scale (1: *strongly disagree*, 8: *strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the three conditions provided a group identification ranging from 0.68 to 0.77 and group-oriented behaviour from 0.85 to 0.88.

2.1.4 | Procedure

We randomly assigned all participants who signed the study consent form to the victim-empathic group or as an observer. We then provided all participants with a military-themed injustice scenario, but the instructions varied depending on the evaluator type. Participants in the victim-empathic condition repeatedly received instructions to 'imagine this as happening to your families'. In contrast, we told participants in the observer condition to 'evaluate as observers of the incident'. Participants responded three times to the measurement of the dependent variable presented for each response type by reading all three responses in random order. After completion, we explained the study to the participants. The study took roughly 20 min to complete.

2.2 | Results

Before conducting a complete analysis, we ran a manipulation check to ensure correct execution among the participants. Compared to the observers (M = 4.60, SD = 1.701), participants in the victim-empathic group (M = 5.40, SD = 1.355) rated themselves as more accepting of the case as a victim ($t(69)$ = 3.659, $p < 0.05$). This result means that the study's manipulation check was successful.

Figure 1a–c illustrates the mean differences for each response and evaluator type. First, we conducted a
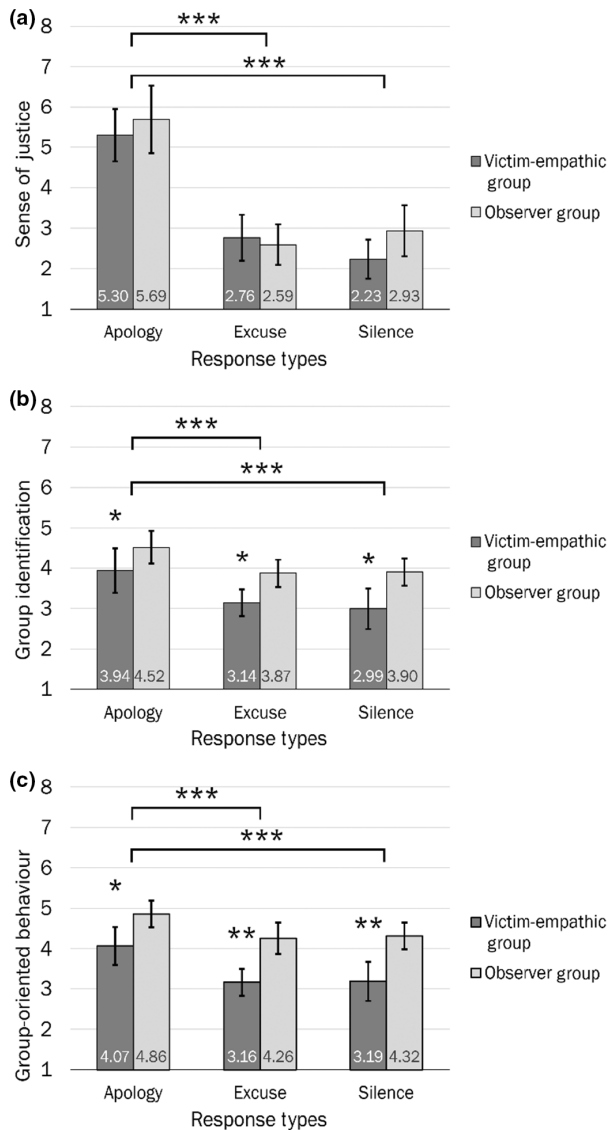
FIGURE 1 Participants' levels of (a) sense of justice, (b) group identification and (c) group-oriented behaviour as a function of evaluator types and three response types. *Note*: The between-participants measure was the evaluator type, and the within-participants measure included the three government responses. Error bars indicate ±1 standard error of means. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

mixed-design ANOVA to see how different response and evaluator types affected the reported sense of justice. The results indicate that the main effects of the response type were significant ($F_{2,67} = 116.07$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.631$). According to the post-analysis, participants showed a higher restoration of justice when they encountered an apology than excuses ($t(69) = -11.80$, $p < 0.001$) or silence ($t(69) = -11.96$, $p < 0.001$). However, the main effect of evaluator type ($F_{2,67} = 1.83$, ns) and the interaction of the two independent variables ($F_{2,67} = 2.09$, ns) were not significant.

Following that, we performed an ANOVA on group identification. The results indicate that the main effects of the response type were significant ($F_{2,67} = 17.90$,

$p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.208$). According to the post-analysis, participants who received an apology demonstrated a stronger identity to the country than when they received excuses ($t(69) = 5.10$, $p < 0.001$) or silence ($t(69) = 4.57$, $p < 0.001$). The evaluator type's main effect was also significant ($F_{2,67} = 5.57$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.076$), implying that observers always identify more strongly with the country than the victim-empathic group. The interaction of the two independent variables, however, was not significant ($F_{2,67} = 0.61$, ns).

Lastly, we conducted an ANOVA on group-oriented behaviour. The main effect of the response type was significant ($F_{2,67} = 18.77$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.216$). In the post-analysis, participants who received an apology showed greater group-oriented behaviour for the country than when they received excuses ($t(69) = 5.68$, $p < 0.001$) or silence ($t(69) = 4.79$, $p < 0.001$). Again, the main effects of the evaluator type were significant ($F_{2,67} = 10.80$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.137$), indicating that observers consistently demonstrated more group-oriented behaviour than participants in the victim-empathic group. The interaction between the two independent variables, however, was not significant ($F_{2,67} = 0.94$, ns).

2.3 | Discussion

As predicted by justice theory, apologies strengthened the sense of justice more than excuses and silence. Participants who encountered an apology also identified more with the country and demonstrated more co-operation for the country. This result is consistent with previous research findings (Huo et al., 2010; Okimoto & Tyler, 2007). As expected, we corroborated that silence was not preferable to an apology. This finding also replicates the existing literature that silence triggers a negative evaluation (e.g. Cugueró-Escofet et al., 2013; Davis & Holtgraves, 1984; Ferrin et al., 2007). The participants' evaluations of the excuses were not significantly different from those of silence. In other words, participants perceived the excuse negatively as a response akin to silence rather than an apology. Scholars have shown that excuses can form a negative impression in interpersonal communication (Schlenker et al., 2001; Skarlicki et al., 2004), and we corroborated that group authorities' excuses create an adverse effect of unfairness.

However, the expected interaction between the response and evaluator types did not appear. Regardless of the evaluator type, all participants had a similar impression of government apologies and excuses. Observers and participants in the victim-empathic group considered apologies fair and excuses unfair, contrary to some governments' expectations (Leunissen et al., 2014; Starzyk et al., 2009). Specifically, observers did not believe that excuses from the ingroup authority were as fair just because they communicated, contrary to our alternative hypothesis.

Is this the basis for the same sense of justice shared by the victims and observers? Empathy through perspective-taking has a limit, and it is especially difficult to empathize with the victims through perspective-taking at the group level. Indeed, Miron et al. (2020) found that empathy towards victims is stronger for vague outgroup members but weaker for ingroup members when the self-other distinction is blurred, and perspective-taking fails. In Study 2, we supplement the limitations of Study 1 by recruiting actual victims as a sample. We can get convincing and valid results by comparing the evaluations of actual victims and observers.

3 | STUDY 2

The paradigm of Study 2 is similar to that of Study 1, but there are two crucial differences. First, in Study 1, we assigned half of the undergraduate participants to a victim-empathic group to compare the evaluator types indirectly, which undermines the study's external validity. However, in Study 2, actual victims participated in the response, given a recent criticism of a South Korean politician who said that mad dogs deserve to be smacked against police officers. Before our study, the politician offered an excuse on social media. Reporters extensively covered the remarks and the excuse, drawing a great deal of public attention, including police. Prior knowledge of this excuse may enhance satisfaction with our study's apology for some, heightening dissatisfaction for others. In sum, we expected that the awareness of the case would not meaningfully impact the study results.

Second, in Study 2, we added and controlled Kay and Jost's (2003) general system justification scale as a covariate to account for police as law enforcement agencies since they can more firmly justify the government's legitimacy than others. We chose a general system justification scale rather than a scale to measure social dominance orientation (e.g. Ho et al., 2015) or authoritarianism (e.g. Zakrisson, 2005) to minimize the reluctance or discomfort that South Korean police officers could experience.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants

In Study 2, we compared evaluations from real police officers in South Korea to on-campus observers. We collected samples by contacting one police officer for a survey and then connecting with another officer they introduced us to. A total of 36 police officers participated (m = 29, f = 7, M_{age} = 33.42, SD_{age} = 7.854), and their combined years of service were 7.47 on average (SD = 7.245). Before participating in the study, we advised the officers that their superiors could not access the data set and that

the study did not affect personnel reviews. Meanwhile, 43 South Korean part-time graduate students comprised the observers (m = 20, f = 23, M_{age} = 38.28, SD_{age} = 8.433). A total of 79 participants freely participate in the study without monetary or other forms of compensation.

3.1.2 | Design and materials

Like Study 1, we chose response types (apology, excuse, silence) with three values as within-participants variables and evaluator types (victims, observers) with two values as between-participants. This time, we conducted a mixed-design ANCOVA. Although the cover story changed to include police officers (see Appendix 2), the overall research procedure is the same as in Study 1. We deleted the instructions asking for empathy with the victim's situation since we had actual victims participate in the study. The government's response resembles Study 1 but with some differences in details.

3.1.3 | Measures

The dependent variables are identical to those in Study 1, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient calculated to check the reliability of all scales was α = 0.78 or higher. This study also included a system justification scale developed by Kay and Jost (2003). This scale is a 9-point scale (1: *strongly disagree*, 9: *strongly agree*) with eight items (e.g. 'In general, I find society to be fair'), and the reliability calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient was α = 0.82.

3.1.4 | Procedure

The research procedure mirrors that of Study 1, except that police officers responded via an online survey. Respondents completed all items in roughly 20 min.

3.2 | Results

Figure 2a–c depicts the mean differences between each response and evaluator type. First, we conducted a mixed-design ANCOVA to see how different response and evaluator types affected people's sense of justice. According to the findings, the covariate system justification motive had a significant effect on the participants' sense of justice ($F_{2,76}$ = 6.19, p < 0.05, η^2 = 0.075). When controlling the covariate, the results revealed a significant main effect on the response type ($F_{2,76}$ = 5.40, p < 0.05, η^2 = 0.066). The post-analysis findings showed that apologies restore a sense of justice more than excuses ($t(78)$ = −6.75, p < 0.001) or silence ($t(78)$ = −7.09, p < 0.001). The main effect of the evaluator type was also significant ($F_{2,76}$ = 5.09, p < 0.05, η^2 = 0.063). Observers restored
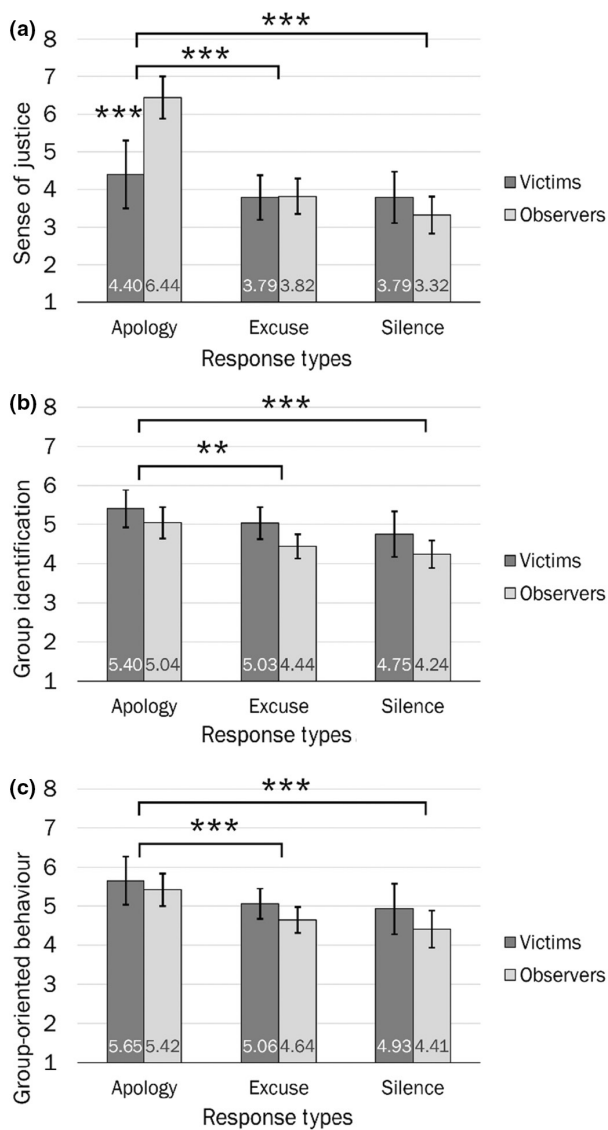
FIGURE 2 Participants' levels of (a) sense of justice, (b) group identification and (c) group-oriented behaviour as a function of evaluator types and three response types. *Note*: The adjusting covariate comprised the degree of system justification. The between-participants measure was the evaluator type, and the within-participant measure included the three government responses. Error bars indicate ±1 standard error of means. **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

a stronger sense of justice than the victims. Unlike the results in Study 1, we observed a significant interaction between the response and evaluator type ($F_{2,76} = 17.86$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.190$). There was no significant difference in the sense of justice between victims and observers in excuses and silence, while victims reported much less justice restoration with apologies ($t(77) = 6.70$, $p < 0.001$).

Next, we performed an ANCOVA to test the effect on group identification. Again, the covariate system justification motive significantly affected group identification ($F_{2,76} = 18.05$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.192$). When controlling the covariate, the main effect of the response type was significant ($F_{2,76} = 5.30$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.065$). Participants felt a

stronger group identification with an apology compared to an excuse ($t(78) = 3.75$, $p < 0.001$) or silence ($t(78) = 4.39$, $p < 0.001$), according to the post-analysis. The main effect of the evaluator type ($F_{2,76} = 1.04$, ns) or the interaction between the response type and the evaluator type, however, was not significant ($F_{2,76} = 0.06$, ns).

Finally, we conducted an ANCOVA to test the effect on group-oriented behaviour. As a covariate, the system justification motive was significant ($F_{2,76} = 18.42$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.195$), and even when we controlled the covariate, the main effect of the response type remained significant ($F_{2,76} = 14.59$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.161$). According to the post-analysis, participants who received an apology tried to engage in more group-oriented behaviour than when they received excuses ($t(78) = 5.07$, $p < 0.001$) or silence ($t(78) = 4.35$, $p < 0.001$). The main effect of the evaluator type ($F_{2,76} = 0.59$, ns) and the interaction between the response type and the evaluator type, however, was insignificant ($F_{2,76} = 0.10$, ns).

3.3 | Discussion

Within-group apologies, like in Study 1, restored group members' sense of justice and encouraged them to engage in their ingroup. The participants believed their government's apology was fair, identified more strongly as Koreans, and volunteered more for their country. This result is consistent with what has already been established in the literature (Huo et al., 2010; Okimoto & Tyler, 2007). On the other hand, participants considered silence unfair in the case of expecting an apology, elicited a negative response and replicated the findings of literature (e.g. Cugueró-Escofet et al., 2013; Davis & Holtgraves, 1984; Ferrin et al., 2007). In the case of excuses, victims and observers perceived it as unfair as silence. We corroborated these findings in Study 1.

In Study 2, the presence of police officers as victims led to a significant interaction in the sense of justice compared to Study 1. However, the interaction did not imply that observers welcomed apologies and excuses from the ingroup authority equally, as we initially expected, but rather that victims welcomed apologies less. Both groups saw excuses equally negatively (Cugueró-Escofet et al., 2013; Schlenker et al., 2001; Skarlicki et al., 2004), but observers experienced justice restoration far more dramatically through the apology compared to excuses or silence, while victims experienced justice restoration to some extent through the apology, although not as strongly as observers. According to the literature, victims are cynical to within-group apologies, while the non-victimized majority welcome them more enthusiastically (Blatz et al., 2014). Additionally, the victim-empathic group in Study 1 showed higher group identification and group-oriented behaviour than the observers. In contrast, in Study 2, there was no meaningful difference between the victims and the observers.

4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

4.1 | Implications of major findings

In this study, we wanted to discover whether within-group apologies were effective for justice restoration and if they promoted engagement and cooperation for the entire group. Specifically, group authorities want to know how the perception of within-group apologies differs between the observer's and victim's perspectives, as it considers many non-victimized and the victims before apologizing. Researchers have reported that humans are less sensitive toward injustices experienced by other ingroup members (Lind et al., 1998; Skarlicki et al., 1998), but non-victimized observers nevertheless are more favourable to within-group apologies than victims (Blatz et al., 2014). We assumed that with within-group apologies, observers accepted them not because they were fair but because the ingroup authorities responded to communication demands. If so, we anticipated identifying interactions in which victims responded positively only to apologies while observers responded positively to excuses and apologies. To empirically test this possibility, we compared the victim-empathic group with the observers in Study 1, and actual victims participated in Study 2.

The summarized findings of this study are as follows. First, according to justice literature, group members accept within-group apologies as fair (de Cremer & Schouten, 2008; Steele & Blatz, 2014). The insights from our study support this idea. By reaffirming shared values in the group and treating members with dignity and respect, within-group apologies enhanced members' sense of justice and increased group engagement. Thus, within-group apologies can be a powerful tool for re-establishing restorative and/or procedural justice. The justice restoration effect is still evident when we contrast within-group apologies with excuses. Participants perceived excuses as distinct from apologies but equally unfair as silence, aligning with prior research on excuses (e.g. Cugueró-Escofet et al., 2013; Davis & Holtgraves, 1984; Ferrin et al., 2007).

Second, there is a difference between victims' and observers' evaluations of within-group apologies. Much literature has investigated observers' negative evaluations of within-group apologies (e.g. Bobowik et al., 2017; Karunaratne & Laham, 2019; Starzyk & Ross, 2008; Wohl et al., 2013), and many group authorities hesitate to apologize in consideration of observers (Leunissen et al., 2014; Starzyk et al., 2009). However, observers evaluate the apology more positively than the victims once it has been provided (Blatz et al., 2014); we obtained the same result in Study 2. Observer participants felt more strongly than victims that the apology goes beyond mere communication, signalling respect for the victims. Our study differs from previous research on ingroup injustice insensitivity (Lind et al., 1998; Skarlicki et al., 1998) as

we focused on assessing the fairness of apologies rather than the recognition of ingroup injustice. Despite potential insensitivity, within-group apologies can still remind non-victimized observers of the injustice.

Note that victims and observers' reactions to authorities' excuses deviated significantly from expectations. Previous studies indicated that detached observers could accurately recognize injustice (e.g. Cugueró-Escofet et al., 2013; Folger et al., 2005), but we questioned if belonging to the victims' group would influence this perception. Our hypothesis suggested victims would view excuses as unfair as silence, whereas observers would find them as fair as apologies. Contrary to expectations, observer participants perceived excuses as unfair as silence, revealing their ability to discern ingroup injustice and understand authorities' responses impacting justice restoration.

Third, victim-empathic observers recover a sense of justice more strongly through apologies than the actual victims. The actual victims experienced a much weaker justice restoration than the observers in Study 2, whereas the victim-empathic observers had no meaningful difference from the observers in Study 1. This finding suggests that the reception of victims and victim-empathic observers may differ when the government apologizes for an injustice. While these observers feel the victims' suffering, they believe the apology ends the pain, whereas victims find it disappointing (Blatz et al., 2014).

4.2 | Limitations and future directions

The unanswered question in this article pertains to apologies' low effectiveness for actual victims. What is the reason behind victims' relatively less positive responses to within-group apologies (Blatz et al., 2014)? First, it is conceivable that extreme samples could have caused a Type 1 error, resulting in a mistaken conclusion about the difference between victims and observers. Increasing the sample size is a straightforward solution to address this problem. However, snowballing police officers by individually encouraging them to participate is time-consuming, and conducting a 20-min survey during a university lecture is also challenging. Moreover, collecting large samples over a long period may introduce response date as an external variable, impacting internal validity. We recommend repeating the study under conditions that enable the rapid collection of a substantial number of samples.

Second, the difference between victims and observers may arise from victims' cynicism towards the apologies. Some literature has already noted that victims' cynicism can limit the effectiveness of apologies (e.g. Critcher & Dunning, 2011; Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). When the group authorities apologize, victims may dismiss the apology as insincere gestures for political tactics. According to the staircase model (Hornsey et al., 2015;

Wohl et al., 2011), apologies are less effective when there is no shared collective guilt and when views regarding the injustice diverge before the apology. In our research, the apology's effectiveness on victims was low even though it was not a deep-rooted historical injustice but just a slip of the tongue, suggesting that addressing injustices within a group should not solely be ended with an apology, irrespective of the offence's magnitude.

The fact that victims are less favourable about within-group apologies than observers may be due to the victims' need for more than just an apology. Even if one violates groups' values, providing monetary compensation for injustice is another way for group authorities to convey their sincerity to victims (Okimoto, 2008). Victims may also demand punishment for the person in charge (Reb et al., 2006) or practical measures to avoid the same injustice from happening again (Cugueró-Escofet et al., 2013; Kirchhoff & Čehajić-Clancy, 2014). Victims' demands can be far more complex than just restoring justice, and simply apologizing may elicit the negative response that it is only words without action. In the future, comparing the evaluations of victims and observers while reflecting on the victim's complex needs will be meaningful.

One might think that the apology used in our study may seem less realistic, affecting its ecological validity. When a president or politician apologizes, measuring its justice-restoring effect becomes tricky. Introducing real-life governmental apologies in research may bias the results as influenced by participants' political orientation, social identity, partisanship, and interests. Formulating a hypothetical apology, we avoided mentioning politically sensitive topics like the authorities' information (e.g. 'in line with President Moon's policy') or the government's doctrines (e.g. 'for the peace and human rights'). Otherwise, supporters of the president or the doctrines might be positive, and non-supporters negative, to any responses.

Lastly, differences in evaluator types in apologies might lead to complex repercussions even after the apology. Due to its subjective nature, justice can vary between victims and observers, leading to the potential to reignite conflicts (Mikula & Wenzel, 2000; Montada, 2011). After receiving apologies, victims might remain dissatisfied, despite observers believing the apology serves justice. Thus, to express their ongoing anger, victims might demand further actions from the government. This scenario contrasts the perception of observers who believe the apology rectifies injustice, closing the case. Eventually, observers might turn against victims demanding additional government action. Therefore, further research on the unexpected consequences following the authorities' sincere apology is required.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yeongjin Yu: Conceptualization; investigation; methodology; validation; visualization; writing – original draft. **Taeyun Jung:** Data curation; formal analysis; methodology; supervision; visualization; writing – review and editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research reported in this paper was conducted in accordance with general ethical guidelines in psychology.

RESEARCH MATERIALS AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research materials are not shared.

PRE-REGISTRATION STATEMENT

The authors have not pre-registered the research or uploaded an analysis plan to an independent registry.

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APPENDIX 1

FULL-TEXT COVER STORY AND RESPONSES

Study 1: Cover story

Suppose you are watching the news. An accident resulted in an on-duty military sergeant's hospitalization, making it difficult to hold him responsible. However, a high-ranking Ministry of National Defence official who heard about the accident privately stated, 'Honestly, South Korea does not need an undisciplined soldier causing such an accident. Never mind what they say'. The news reporter said the minister planned an in-person public apology.

Study 1: Apology

Honourable citizens, today we are here after recognizing the severity of this situation and feeling deeply responsible for our wrongdoing. I sincerely acknowledge that I have caused great disappointment to the soldiers and families affected by the accident, and there is no excuse for this. I will accompany the wounded soldier and his family with sympathy for the sadness and pain. The wounded soldier is also a noble hero, dedicated to his country, and the Ministry of National Defence values and encourages such dedication.

Study 1: Excuse

Honourable citizens, the Ministry of Defence has been informed about this issue and would like to state its position based on the results of the internal meeting. It is impossible to manage and stop a slip of the tongue, and some have unfairly distorted high officials' goodwill for the wounded soldier. Given the serious international situation, we ask for your understanding in light of the soldiers' poor discipline these days. If my remark has hurt any soldier, please do not misunderstand my intentions.

APPENDIX 2

FULL-TEXT COVER STORY AND RESPONSES

Study 2: Cover story

Consider the following scenario. Police officers staged a rally to demand improvements in their working conditions and morale. However, a high-ranking official at the Ministry of the Interior and Safety stated privately, 'Did the police officers ask for something? How can we care about such little matters?' Following the media reports, the National Assembly criticized the official for making an improper slip of the tongue as a security administration official, and the minister plans to apologize in person.

Study 2: Apology

Honourable citizens, today we are here after recognizing the severity of this situation and feeling deeply responsible for our wrongdoing. I sincerely acknowledge disappointing our police officers with a rude slip of the tongue; there is no excuse for this. The Ministry of the Interior and Safety will listen to the police officers' complaints and take appropriate measures given the importance of public security. I deeply value and encourage the dedication of police officers prepared to put themselves in danger for public safety.

Study 2: Excuse

Honourable citizens, the Ministry of the Interior and Safety has been informed about this issue and would like to state its position based on the results of the internal meeting. It is impossible to manage and stop a slip of the tongue, and some have unfairly distorted high officials' goodwill for police officers. Given the wide scope of the Ministry of the Interior and Safety's jurisdiction and heavy workload, we ask for your understanding. If my remark has offended any police officer, please do not misunderstand my intentions.