Accounting for the past: the role of public apologies in Ireland

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ABSTRACT
Demands for accountability are a prominent feature of contemporary public life. Although much academic attention has focused on perceived denials of accountability and blame avoidance in various political, administrative and transitional justice contexts, there has been much less analysis of blame acceptance and efforts to provide accountability. This paper explores attempts to provide such accountability through the medium of public apologies. It considers accountability as an iterative process that is intrinsically linked to perceptions by target audiences. Our analysis draws on a survey of 1007 citizens across the island of Ireland and public attitudes to apologies reflected in focus groups with a stratified sample of the general population. We find that the public appetite for apologies is strong and that they are generally valued as a core element of accountability provision. Public evaluations of such apologies are nonetheless modulated by a range of intersecting variables. In the concluding section we consider these various dynamics and reflect on how viewing public apologies as a complex dialogic process can inform broader conceptual understandings of accountability.

KEYWORDS Apologies; Accountability; Audience; Reputation; Ireland

Introduction
On 22 October 2019, then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar made a much-anticipated public apology in Dáil Éireann (the Irish Lower House) to the victims of a cervical cancer screening programme (McEnroe, 2019). Although initially welcomed by a patients’ support group as a ‘watershed moment’ in the campaign for accountability (McMahon, 2019), by that evening the media focus had shifted to victims’ disappointment at the relatively low number of politicians who attended the Taoiseach’s statement (Bowers, 2019). The following day it was reported that health service staff were also unhappy with some of the Taoiseach’s comments and in particular with the suggestion...
(as part of the apology) that victims had been subject to ‘deceit’ in the ‘litany of failures’ they experienced (Cullen, 2019). The cervical cancer statement is not the only high-profile apology provided by a recent Irish government.\(^2\) It is, however, interesting for our purposes as it illuminates many of the key dynamics underpinning the public apology process.\(^3\) As will be discussed further below, these include the context and choreography of the delivery, the sensitivity of language, and the diverse and evolving impact on different audiences.

Concerns about accountability deficits in Irish public life are not new (Byrne, 2012), but they have garnered increasing attention since the early 1990s, as reflected in the establishment of a series of quasi-judicial public tribunals of inquiry to examine alleged malpractice in public life (MacCarthaigh, 2005; Murphy, 2005). Serial political promises of increased probity and transparency, in many cases arising directly from the findings of these tribunals, have resulted in a plethora of new institutional responses, all with the aim of addressing accountability deficits. In respect of the public sector and political realm, these have included the Freedom of Information Act and associated Office of the Freedom of Information Commissioner (1997); the Electoral Act 1997; the Public Offices Commission (1995) and its successor, the Standards in Public Office Commission (2001); the Protected Disclosures Act 2014; and the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015.

Other legislation targeting malpractice in the private sector has included the Prevention of Corruption Amendment Acts 2001 and 2010, and the Criminal Justice (Corruption Offences) Act 2018 which consolidated and amended pre-existing anti-corruption legislation. Parliamentary committees have become more active in seeking accountability not only from the executive authority of the state, but also from non-state actors including for example financial institutions and the insurance industry. These institutional measures have nonetheless failed to keep pace with demands for accountability in respect of the management of public resources, alleged instances of maladministration, poor performance of public duty, and the ill-treatment of those in receipt of state services. What is curious, however, is the under-analysis of those occasions when accountability is realised by means of a public apology.

The global proliferation of public apologies in recent decades has led some commentators to refer to ‘the age of apology’ (Gibney et al., 2008). Others refer to ‘apology mania’ (Taft, 2000, p. 1135) and an ‘epidemic of apologies’ (Thompson, 2002, p. viii). This general trend has provoked extensive scholarly interest and the concept of apology is now diversely theorised across a broad interdisciplinary literature including law, sociology, anthropology, history, management, philosophy and political science (cf. Benoit, 2015; Brooks, 2020; Gibney et al., 2008; Hornsey & Wohl, 2013; Lazare, 2004; McAlinden, 2021; Nobles, 2008 Tavuchis, 1991). It is notable, however, that there has been little in-depth empirical research on the role of public apologies.
across the island of Ireland. This is particularly surprising given the increasing demand for apologies in respect of both recent and historical harms. Instead, there has been a concentrated focus on the perceived absence of accountability in public, political and academic discourse (MacCarthaigh, 2021).

This paper seeks to address this anomaly by exploring the role of apologies as a means of delivering public accountability and broader societal reparation for victims. The research is drawn from a wider project focusing on apologies by state and non-state actors across three discrete sites of harm. These are the Northern Ireland conflict; institutional child abuse; and the 2008 banking crisis.

The three sites are diverse, involving different actors, time periods and forms of harm, but the consequences of each have been far-reaching for Irish public life. The violent conflict that erupted in Northern Ireland in 1969 eventually claimed more than 3600 lives, equivalent when scaled to population size to approximately 135,000 deaths in Britain (Thornton, Kelters, Feeney, & McKittrick, 2004). The legacy of that conflict continues to shape and inform political, social and economic relations between and within Britain and Ireland and casts a dark shadow over broader society.

Historical institutional abuse refers to past abuses of women and children in residential care during the twentieth century, including care homes, industrial schools, Mother and Baby institutions and ‘Magdalene Laundries’; past sexual abuse by members of religious organisations; and the removal of children from families to institutional care. The obligation on the State to apologise for historical institutional abuse stems from the need to address both ‘legal wrongs’ and broader ‘moral’ and ‘agentic’ responsibility for abdications of responsibility and failure to provide redress and remedial actions (McAlinden, 2021).

The final site of harm arises from the fact that Ireland was one of the hardest hit European states in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. In particular, its banking system was badly exposed after years of poorly-regulated lending practices. One of the costliest banking crises in history was followed by years of state retrenchment and spending cutbacks with huge social costs, and a state ‘bailout’ by the Troika of the International Monetary Fund, European Commission and European Central Bank in 2010 (MacCarthaigh, 2018).

Our analysis in this paper focuses primarily on the relationship between apologies and accountability. Recognising, as Brudholm (2020, pp. 835) puts it, that the apology process ‘involves communication and interaction between several parties’ we consider both linear perceptions of apology, i.e. taking public apologies as a standalone outworking of accountability, as well as compound dynamics, i.e. acknowledging the dialogic and iterative nature of the apology process.

There is long-established recognition in the academic literature that accountability must be considered from multiple perspectives (Romzek &
Dubnick, 1987) and that it cannot be fully understood without reference to the perspective of the relevant audiences to whom it is being delivered (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, 2017). There is nonetheless relatively little consideration of the perspective of those demanding accountability, including what they consider adequate to their needs. Whilst our wider research project includes detailed empirical assessment of the views of direct victims, our focus here is on the attitude of the general public. Our rationale for focusing on this secondary audience is that victims are not ‘standalone actors’ but rather members of broader communities who are indirectly wronged (Coicaud, 2020, p. 867). Most public apologies thus address (whether implicitly or explicitly) broader societal issues and speak to fundamentally important issues regarding how society as a whole ‘sees itself’ (Scott, 1999) and how it deals with the harms of the past (Nobles, 2008).

The paper begins with an overview of recent developments in the study of accountability internationally, with a particular focus on reputation-based interpretations. It then examines the role played by apologies in addressing perceived accountability deficits, informed by relevant literature in political science, transitional justice, sociology and management. In order to tease out the dialogic nature of the apology process and in particular the dynamics that shape how apologies are received by target audiences, we then consider public attitudes to apologies as reflected in an all-island survey and a series of focus groups with a stratified sample of the general population of Ireland, North and South. To conclude we reflect briefly on how viewing public apologies as a complex dialogic process informs the broader theoretical literature on accountability.

Accountability in public life: from principal-agent to reputational models

The study of accountability has yielded a substantial literature in recent years (Bovens, Goodin, & Schillemans, 2014), and the term is now well established within those academic fields concerned with public governance, including the political sciences. Olsen goes so far as to suggest that accountability has now become an ‘obsession’ with scholars (2017, p. 4). He further posits that the relentless growth in demands for accountability speaks to the heart of concerns about the state of democratic politics today – that it is ‘part of a legitimacy crisis, a loss of confidence in institutions and leaders, and a struggle over the terms of political order’ (2017, p. vii). Some scholars have framed this debate in terms of a ‘democide’ or the politics of a ‘post-democratic era’ (Chou, 2013; Crouch, 2020).

In the practice of politics and administration, accountability has long been considered ‘one of those golden concepts that no-one can be against’ (Bovens, 2007, p. 225). Concern about accountability deficits continues to
define popular characterisations and criticisms of contemporary democracy and debates over what panacea will best address these deficits fill newspaper columns and inspire popular titles (Geoghegan, 2020; Runciman, 2019). Much of the academic research on accountability has a similarly negative bent, focusing primarily on its perceived absence in different political and administrative contexts, and the role of blame avoidance in the design and operation of government (Hood, 2010; Philp, 2009).

Principal-agent (P-A) conceptualisations of accountability dominate this literature. Studies adopting the P-A approach are primarily concerned with issues of information asymmetry and goal-conflicts, and methods of control and compliance (Bovens & Schillemans, 2008). Work by Strøm, Müller and Bergman (2003) captures this perspective well in the context of modern democracies. They describe a linear chain of superior-subordinate delegation from citizens to the administrative system within a state, which works its way through parliaments and political executives, all with a corresponding system of accountability checks. This view of accountability is described by Bovens as a relationship ‘between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences’ (2007, p. 450). Indeed, a notable feature of the expansion in accountability studies is an emphasis on the multiple dimensions or ‘directions’ confronting those being held to account – vertical, horizontal, diagonal (Schillemans, 2011) – as well as a growing number of perspectives – democratic, managerial, market, professional – within which accountability relationships are considered. Seminal work by Romzek and Dubnick (1987) on the multi-dimensional web of accountability relationships within which most actors operate has stimulated a substantial volume of research on accountability dilemmas, inconsistencies and overlaps (Bovens et al., 2014). The principal-agent formulation has nonetheless persisted as a central component of the study and the practical pursuit of accountability.

Critiquing the ‘mainstream principal-agent approaches’, Olsen notes that they are decidedly US-centric, with a particular focus on ‘fairly stable institutions and interinstitutional relations’ (2017, p. 4). Noting the limitations of this perspective, he argues the need for a broader conception of accountability that does not presume settled agents and principals/forums. Pointing to another perceived shortcoming in the principal-agent model of accountability, Busuioc and Lodge (2016, 2017) call attention to disinterest and lack of diligence amongst account-holders, as well as ‘gaming, cheating and slack- ing, and a decline in moral responsibility and/or intrinsic motivation’ amongst those being held to account (2016, p. 248).

To fully capture these dynamics, they propose a reputation-based model for better understanding the motivations, interest and intensity of accountability-related activity amongst account holders and holdees. In this
perspective, the emphasis is less on formal structures and methods of account holding and giving, and is instead more concerned with one’s standing and competence in the eyes of different audiences. For example, if a principal’s reputation is held in lesser esteem by the public than that of the agent, it may undermine the legitimacy of the formal process of account-seeking and giving between them. They suggest that the rationale behind accountability provisions is not the serving of high-value normative goals (democratic control, avoidance of power concentration), but rather more ‘mundane’ organisational concerns with reputation, esteem, and, ultimately, survival. They propose that ‘a reputation-based approach focuses attention on appearance and presentation and in particular how efforts are received by networks of audiences’ (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, p. 252). The emphasis here is less on the methods and quality of control enjoyed by account-holders over account-holdees (cf. McCubbins and Schwartz’s [1984] much-used ‘fire alarm’ and ‘police patrol’ models) and rather on appreciation of the networks of audiences to which both parties must account in a coherent and consistent manner. The logic of this is that both parties in an accountability relationship depend on the performance of the other for a reputation-enhancing outcome.

As well as challenging the dominant P-A perspective, a reputation-based approach to accountability raises important questions in respect of the provision (rather than denial) of accountability and blame acceptance (rather than blame avoidance) in public life. Given social expectations and norms around good governance and organisational stewardship, demonstrating accountability has in itself an important intrinsic value. How an organisation presents its ability to account to its various internal and external audiences is an essential part of reputation management (Carpenter, 2010). It explains why organisations may wish to publicise that they are, for example, accountable to more forums than they are formally required to be. Conversely, the actuality or perception of not being accountable is deemed to have reputational consequences.

Providing a public apology is one of the most effective methods for accepting blame and demonstrating accountability. As noted above, however, there are many factors to be considered prior to, during, and after the delivery of such an apology. Poorly constructed or ineffective apologies can have adverse consequences. There are often inevitable trade-offs to be made between external and internal audiences and if an organisation fails effectively to manage internal and external expectations, serious dissent may be provoked. As the apology delivered by Leo Varadkar for Cervical Check failures clearly illustrates, different audiences must be carefully considered and should ideally be engaged in the apology design process. Before presenting data on the role of public apologies in Ireland, we next consider
how we might conceptualise public apologies in the broader context of accountability-seeking.

**Accountability in the age of apologies**

Demands for accountability are now a quotidian feature of parliamentary politics and public life and the criteria for determining whether or not accountability has been met is itself the subject of partisan interpretation. As noted, the issue has attracted much academic attention, with a particular focus on perceived denials of accountability through blame avoidance in various political and administrative contexts (Hood, 2010). There has been much less analysis of accountability acceptance and the efficacy of efforts to manifest that accountability through such means as public apologies. This is surprising given that apologies by both public and private organisations are now a frequent occurrence, and that the global spread of the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements has resulted in high-profile public apologies by prominent figures in the entertainment industry and public life for past transgressions (Schumann, 2020).

As noted above, as well as individual personal apologies, state apologies for past harms have become increasingly common (Cunningham, 2014). At a macro-theoretical level it might be argued that realpolitik – the once dominant ideology in international relations based on material rather than moral or idealistic considerations – has given way to a new ‘international moralism’ (Barkan, 2000), with powerful states now routinely apologising to weaker ones. Another explanation for this outbreak of global contrition might be the international focus on the universality of human rights that emerged following the injustices of the Second World War (Weyeneth, 2001).

More recently, the end of the Cold War and the democratising processes that followed in many Eastern European and Latin American countries spurred the global north to face and redress past atrocities. The onset of globalisation led to increased communication and transparency, and has facilitated an opening up of the books of the past and corresponding opportunities to convey remorse. Australia went a step further than a one-off apology by introducing an annual National Sorry Day in 1998 as a form of contrition for the mistreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Such national apologies for past harms can of course be politically divisive. For example, in 2020 the Dutch government refused to apologise for the slave trade even though its capital city of Amsterdam voted in 2019 to do so (Cluskey, 2019).

Public apologies by organisations take the form of what Wohl, Hornsey, and Philpot (2011) refer to as ‘intergroup’ apologies, i.e. from one group (e.g. an organisation, social group or state) to another. These are to be distinguished from ‘interpersonal’ apologies as intergroup apologies tend to
involve more serious and often systemic offences, and the apologiser is representative of a group rather than the actual offender. Wohl et al. propose that intergroup contexts ‘are generally more characterised by competitiveness, fear, and mistrust than interpersonal contexts’ (2011, p. 72). Apologies from organisations, including states, also differ from interpersonal apologies in the sense that they are considered public speech acts – social performances that require careful thought and preparation (Austin, 1962). In contrast, apologies between individuals are, more often than not, offered privately, which in turn alters modes of delivery and reception.

The roots of the modern study of apologies lie in two schools of sociological thought. The first represents an evolution of the term from its etymological origins in Greek, ‘apologia’, meaning an argument made in defence of one’s actions. In this perspective, Tavuchis defined an apology as ‘an acknowledgement and painful embracement of our deeds, coupled with a declaration of regret’ (1991, p. 19). To apologise is therefore to acknowledge, ‘that one has no excuse, defense, justification, or explanation for an action’ (1991, p. 17), with a view to attaining reconciliation between two or more parties by eliciting forgiveness. This is by far the dominant definition across the interdisciplinary literature, including law (Minow, 1998), political science (Gibney et al., 2008; Nobles, 2008) and social psychology (Hornsey & Wohl, 2013). Once it is determined that an apology is to be provided, acknowledgement of wrongdoing represents the first step in the process of its delivery. For Tavuchis, at a minimum, an apology requires an ‘acknowledgement and painful embracement of our deeds, coupled with a declaration of regret’ (1991, p. 19). Across disciplines, scholars highlight the central importance of acknowledgement to victims in validating their experiences and restoring dignity (Allan, 2008; Freeman, 2008; Thompson, 2012).

The second key school of thought on apology was initiated by Goffman, who described an apology as ‘a gesture through which an individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule’ (1971, p. 113). This definition conceptualises apology as a ‘remedial’ or corrective tool following offensive behaviour. This definition is more commonly used in the fields of management and communication (Benoit, 2015; Hearit, 2006; Regester & Larkin, 2008), particularly when there is reference to reputational or ‘face-saving’ strategies.

A key difference between Goffman and Tavuchis is the degree of emphasis and agency placed on the victim. Goffman emphasises the individual offender and how an apology, as a remedial strategy, can reduce the offensiveness of an act. Tavuchis, however, considers an apology as a fundamentally dyadic, interactive and relational process between an offender and offended, which cannot be understood without reference to the other. This is illustrated in the sequential structure of an apology, and in particular, the
call to apologise. Both agree that an apology cannot, regardless its sincerity or completeness, determine its own outcome – in other words, it cannot be a monologue. Otherwise, an offender could recite the appropriate formula following each transgression without vulnerability. As such, the power of the victim to accept or deny an apology is paramount for an apology to work. Hence our interest in this paper in how apologies are received by both direct victims and the general public.

In conceptualising how apologies might serve to restore or repair image, researchers tend to draw from Goffman’s work on how apologies engender forgiveness. This is particularly common in crisis management literature (Benoit & Pang, 2008; Coombs, 2007; Weber, Erickson, & Stone, 2011) where it has sparked related exploration of the circumstances in which apologies are used, their content, and delivery. This approach is also concerned with the effects of apologies at both the organisational and individual (manager/CEO) levels.

Coombs (2013) argues that the increased use of corporate apologies has transformed them into rituals performed semi-automatically by leaders in times of crisis. In management literature, apologies are well established as the response of final resort using frameworks such as Benoit’s (2015) Theory of Image Repair.8 In a similar vein, Kellerman (2006), suggests that corporate leaders employ apologies as a means to place an issue behind them at minimal cost. Coombs (2013) argues that such an approach risks lowering the effectiveness of apologies, as they are viewed as neither spontaneous nor genuine. However, if there is an expectation of an apology, failure to provide one is clearly problematic. Therefore, while apologising may not serve to aid an organisation, withholding one could have even further negative effects, which resonates with the ‘normative dilution effect’ identified in social psychology literature (Okimoto, Wenzel, & Hornsey, 2015, p. 135). This is not unique to private organisations, and such thinking can permeate public sector organisations and even states.

In sum, there has been a dramatic increase in the use of apologies by governments in recent years, and an associated proliferation of cross-disciplinary literature on the concept. There is broad agreement that the use of apologies is context-dependent, and that the motivations of both provider and audience play an important role in where, when and how an apology is delivered – and how it is received. To further explore these dynamics we turn to consider the public perception of apologies in the Irish context.

**Methods**

In order to address the dearth of work on the role of apologies in Ireland and to better understand the dynamics underpinning the apology process we draw upon research conducted for the wider ‘Apologies, Abuses and
Dealing with the Past project over a five-year period (June 2016-May 2021). Following an extensive cross-disciplinary literature review (drawn from law, transitional justice, anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, business and management, philosophy and political science), the project utilised the island of Ireland as a single case study and, as noted above, examined the issue of public apologies in respect of three sites of harm – the ‘Troubles’, historical institutional abuse and the 2008 banking crisis.

Whilst these three sites of harm are historically, politically and culturally distinct, the cross-cutting dynamics of political violence, religious belief and economic values have all been central to the evolution of communal and national imaginations in the ‘two Irelands’ (Anderson, 1983; Fitzpatrick, 1998). The legitimating – and indeed eulogising – of select historical violence remains a thorny issue for all major political traditions. Likewise recent high-profile inquiries and related apologies by church and state figures for historical institutional abuse has provoked much soul-searching and self-examination regarding both personal faith and church-state relations. Although provoking a less obvious effusion of loss and decline, the identification of systemic corporal misconduct has also unsettled ethnic and political identity markers on both sides of the border. In order to capture the direct lived experience of both direct stakeholders and the general public the wider project applied a triangulated methodology to examine the use of public apologies across the three sites.

This involved:

- Compilation of a newspaper archive of public apologies across the three domains.
- An all-island survey which examined public attitudes towards apologies in respect of the Troubles, historical institutional abuse and the 2008 banking crisis. This was carried out by a market research organisation and involved a CAPI-based (computer assisted personal interview) approach conducted in the homes of selected respondents during June and July 2017. The survey utilised a stratified random sample of adults resident in either Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland. In total, 1007 face-to-face interviews were conducted across every county in Ireland representative of the adult population (509 female/498 male; aged 18–80) in each of 100 sampling points across the island of Ireland, with the allocation of sampling points disseminated proportionate to the population distribution.9
  - A series of 26 focus groups (n = 120 + 128). This included 14 focus groups with general population (drawn in part from general population survey) and 12 focus groups with victims (4 groups per sector)
- These took place during the period 2017–18 and each involved groups of between seven and fifteen adults. The locations were Dublin (3), Belfast
Sixty-eight semi-structured interviews conducted with ‘perpetrators’, victims/survivors, policy makers and other relevant stakeholders across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.10

The themes for the focus groups and interviews emerged from the literature review. They were recorded, transcribed and then coded in NVivo, using a fusion of inductive and deductive approaches.11 It is obviously not possible within the confines of this paper to do justice to this complex and wide-ranging data-set. For the purposes of our analysis of the relationship between public apologies and accountability we thus draw primarily on the survey data and some of the key findings from the general population focus groups.

**Public attitudes to apologies in Ireland**

Our analysis of attitudes to public apologies focuses on two key elements: the public demand for apologies, including appraisals of their utility; and the dynamics that sway public assessments of their sincerity and effectiveness.

**The perceived value and utility of public apologies**

One of the opening questions put to members of the general population in our CAPI survey asked simply whether or not public apologies were important in dealing with past harms associated with the Troubles, historical institutional child abuse and the banking crisis. Aggregating responses for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, Figure 1 illustrates that a clear majority agreed or strongly agreed that they were important, particularly in respect of institutional child abuse.

![Figure 1. The importance of public apologies.](image-url)
A minority (almost 20%) were less convinced of their efficacy in respect of the Troubles, split between those who were not sure and those who believed people should ‘just move on’. It is nonetheless noteworthy that, in Northern Ireland more than 70% of the sample surveyed agreed that public apologies were important. Indeed Figure 2 illustrates that public apologies were ranked reasonably high alongside other reparative measures such truth commissions and compensation. Whilst acknowledging that they were not the only means of accounting for past harms it is clear from our data that a majority of survey respondents in Ireland, North and South, considered public apologies to be ‘extremely important’.

Focus groups presented an opportunity to explore in more detail the factors that swayed perceptions of the importance and general utility of apologies for past harms. A number of participants suggested, for example, that the value of an apology depends on the nature of the harm:

It depends on the nature of what you are apologising for as well. That’s a huge factor. Like the child abuse thing. People actually don’t want an apology for that no matter how well worded or anything. An apology won’t cut it. So in some cases like an apology, it won’t ever vindicate the act.

Male participant, Cork City focus group.

The more superficial the topic the easier it is to say sorry and the bigger the issue if anybody apologises for a massive scandal or anything like that - it’s seen as admitting fault and that could involve punishment so it’s not something that comes easy.

Female participant, Dublin focus group No.3.

Making a related point, a West Cork participant linked the utility of an apology to the scale of the harm inflicted. She suggested:

![Figure 2. Issue% identifying measure as ‘extremely important’, by site of analysis. *For those questioned about the banking crisis, the options of monuments and reconciliation gestures were not offered.](image-url)
If I was a victim of the banking crisis where I had a family member who suffered a traumatic health catastrophe or a family member who died, as a result of the pressure, committed suicide as a result of financial pressure, what good is an apology to me?

Female participant, West Cork focus group.

Other participants noted that the purpose or intent of the apology is a significant factor and suggested, for example, that apologies designed to advance broader societal reconciliation must be accompanied by complementary measures.

Several scholars have emphasised the importance of follow-through mechanisms to ensure that the full reconciliatory potential apology is realised. For example, Carranza et al. argue that apologies can only promote reconciliation when accompanied by ‘an effective process of recognising the rights of victims, providing concrete forms of reparations, investigating the crimes committed, and reforming those institutions that failed to protect citizens’ (2015, p. 9). Without such actions, particularly at the collective level, apologies are dismissed as gesture politics or empty rhetoric (Corn-tassel & Holder, 2008).

This view was shared by many of our focus group participants. Explaining why she wants justice rather than an apology, a direct victim of the Troubles based in Fermanagh said:

Surely the idea even of apologies in the context of the Troubles is to me almost nearly just hypothetical, because, well I am speaking personally, I had two family members, two close family members murdered, and we’re not expecting … well, the generation of the two people that were murdered they are all dead now. So, they are not going to get an apology, but I wouldn’t expect an apology. I wouldn’t want an apology. I wouldn’t even listen to an apology. What I want to see, and what I will never see, unfortunately, forget about your apology, I want justice.

Female participant, Fermanagh focus group

Others pointed to the financial and other losses incurred by victims of the banking crisis and suggested that an apology must be accompanied with some material means of redressing the harm caused. A Fermanagh focus group participant stated:

If you were just an ordinary member of the public who had lost out financially, you know, in a big way and you couldn’t afford to lose that money. I mean an apology on its own isn’t much good. They need to be able to in some way rectify the situation for the person who has lost out.

Male participant, Fermanagh focus group

A related and consistent theme to emerge in the focus groups concerned the issue of post-apology actions, and the need for demonstrable
manifestations of seeking to address past harms and minimise the chances of recurrence. By contrast, it was noted that the absence of follow-through by means of reparations such as financial compensation, judicial proceedings or even victim memorialisation through monuments or public displays often diminishes the perceived sincerity of the apology.

I think the word comes easy, but we don’t necessarily mean what we’re saying. I think it’s very easy to say sorry, actions speak a lot louder than words.

Female participant, Dublin focus group 3

It’s not the apology, it’s the actions after the apology.

Male participant, Newry focus group 1

To me, again it boils back down to what’s the fix. What’s been put in place to make sure this doesn’t happen again?

Male participant, Cork City focus group

Referring to the apology by then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, to the victims of the Magdalene laundries in 2013, one focus group participant felt that the apology was undermined by the absence of follow-through measures:

… when we had the leader of our government apologising for child abuse and for the homes and he appeared to be in tears in the Dáil, but the follow-up, if that apology was so sincere why was it not followed up with kind of repaying and making sure that everything got back into place and help the people that he was apologising to. There was no follow-up there

Female participant, West Cork focus group

The idea of such actions being a necessary prerequisite to forgiveness also featured in focus group discussions. A West Belfast participant suggested:

I would say it takes sometimes a wee bit of action there before the forgiveness can actually come through … you need to see the person’s behaviour first, before … it all depends, doesn’t it? It can actually go with that abuse, the Troubles, banking crisis; you need to see proof, which is action, isn’t it?

Female participant, West Belfast focus group

In this perspective, an apology has both retrospective and prospective accountability dimensions in that it seeks to account for the past and offers the promise of non-recurrence in the future. A Galway-based contributor pointed specifically to this issue of guarantees of non-recurrence, noting that for him this was the first and most important step in an effective apology process:

The first ingredient in an apology for something that has happened seriously is the reassurance for people that it is no longer happening. That’s more important. That is actually more important than dealing with the past issues.
In addition to these temporal dimensions, it is clear that public apologies must be considered in light of a multi-dimensional web of perspectives and relationships. This includes reference to the wider societal importance associated with apologies and as such we draw in the next section on our empirical data to explore further the specific factors that influence how public apologies are received by the general public.

**Factors influencing the assessment of public apology**

Regardless the purpose or intent, there is a broad consensus in the interdisciplinary literature that there are two dimensions to the delivery of an apology. The first is the verbal dimension, consisting of the content of the apologetic speech and what is being apologised for. The second is the performative dimension, concerned with the context surrounding the apology such as the timing, speaker, medium, and ceremony that frames the delivery of the apology (Austin, 1962). The media reportage on the delivery of the apology by Taoiseach Leo Varadkar to victims of the Cervical Check scandal in 2019 (above) illustrates how both dimensions impact upon different audiences. For an apology to be memorable, however, the performative aspect of the apology is particularly important (Celermajer, 2009).

As we have seen, public apologies by states and organisations differ from interpersonal apologies in the sense that they are typically viewed as public speech acts, and their location and mode of delivery is as important as their content, if not more so. One of the most iconic apologies in the twentieth century was the *Kniefall von Warschau* (Warsaw kneeling) by West German Chancellor Willy Brandt during a 1970 visit to the site of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943, at which he did not speak but instead bent his knee and paid silent respect to the victims of the Nazi state. The 2010 apology in the House of Commons by the Prime Minster David Cameron for the 1972 Bloody Sunday killings of innocent civilians by the Parachute Regiment was notable for its careful choreography including synchronous televised screening to a public crowd near the site of the killings (Edwards & Luckie, 2014).

When asked if they recalled any public apologies in respect of each site of analysis, more than 20% of survey respondents indicated that they were aware of apologies by republicans and the British State for their role in the Troubles; more than 30% recalled apologies by the Catholic Church and the Irish state for institutional child abuse; but notably less than 12% could recall any apologies connected to the banking crisis (Figure 3).

The fact that apologies relating to the banking crisis did not resonate with the general population was underlined in focus group discussions as none of our participants could recall an apology by bankers in spite of the fact that a number of senior Irish bankers *did* provide apologies and statement of regret.
In the aftermath of the crisis and at a parliamentary inquiry during 2014-15, in focus groups we were able to further probe which apologies are heard and remembered and more importantly why some were deemed more effective than others. There is of course a multitude of reasons to explain why a particular apology resonates with an individual but three key elements came through in group discussion: who said it, what they said, and how they said it.

Who delivers the apology
The issue of ‘who’ provides a public apology features strongly in the corporate management literature concerning apologies (Coombs, 2007; Coombs, 2013; Hearit, 2006), i.e. should it be the CEO or the individual member of staff who committed the offence. And for many of our focus group participants the issue of ‘who’ delivered the apology was a key factor influencing issues such as impact and sincerity. A male contributor from Dublin suggested:

I think it all goes back to who apologises and the sincerity of the apology the words could be exactly the same, but whoever’s delivering it [matters].

Male participant, Dublin focus group No.1

This question provoked mixed responses from focus group respondents with some individuals suggesting that indirect apologies are of limited value. A Newry-based contributor stated:

The pope, no matter his seniority in the Catholic church, the pope apologising to people for other people’s wrongdoing, I don’t think holds any weight.

Female participant, Newry focus group No.1

A Dublin participant disagreed, suggesting that apologies on behalf of the Church can be effective. He recalled:
The only guy that I know who apologised, he was an Augustinian Priest. He walked from Cobh to Dublin in reparation for the damage that the Church did.

Male participant, Dublin focus group No.2

In this instance, of course, the efficacy of the apology was amplified by a very public gesture of atonement. Another interesting factor that came to light in focus groups was the fact that ‘who’ delivers an apology directly impacts on how (if at all) it is heard by target audiences. A member of a South Dublin focus group, for example, was quite candid in stating that:

‘To be honest, I won’t hear it. I don’t care what Martin McGuinness says, I won’t hear it.’

Male participant, Dublin focus group No.1

It is thus clear that how an apology is received is directly influenced by perceptions of the individual delivering it. Another key variable is, of course, how the apology is worded.

**The content of the apology**

As the Cervical Check apology demonstrates, language and terminology are centrally important to the success of a public apology. In that instance, health care staff took grave exception to the association of the word ‘deceit’ in respect of their role. In other contexts critics have focused on what is not said. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s famous apology on behalf of the Australian government for the ‘Stolen Generations’ was, for example, heavily criticised for its failure to use the word ‘genocide’ to acknowledge the full scale of the trauma suffered by indigenous communities (Barta, 2008, p. 210). In the Irish context the apology delivered by Gusty Spence on behalf of the Combined Loyalist Command in 1994 stood out in the minds of many focus group participants precisely because of the language used. In particular the phrase ‘true and abject remorse’ was repeatedly referred to by focus group participants as an appropriate and effective use of language.

The general proliferation of the use of apologies by governments and non-governmental agencies makes it more challenging for a specific apology to stand out, particularly in the absence of other performative factors or acts of contrition. In some instances it is certainly clear that over-apologising, or repeatedly using the words ‘I’m sorry’ can dilute impact and value. As one focus group member noted:

[The Catholic Church] have made the same apology again and again, by people who [were] kept on who had done the exact same things than what they were apologising for. So, people are just like, we’re not even listening to that. That apology means nothing. It is a shame, because as somebody has said, the victims do need an apology.
Female participant, Newry focus group No.2

Public apologies from organisations and states differ from interpersonal apologies precisely because of the social performance element that demands careful choreography and delivery (Horelt, 2018). For many focus group participants it was certainly clear that what stood out in their minds was not just the words that were spoken in an apology but also the manner in which these were delivered.

How the Apology is delivered
When asked to reflect on what makes for a sincere apology, it was clear that the tearful address issued in 2013 by Taoiseach Enda Kenny in Dáil Éireann for the victims of the Magdalene Laundries had a significant impact on the general population. A Cork city-based participant noted:

I remember watching on television, was it Enda Kenny giving the apology for the Magdalene Laundries? He was actually really sincere in doing it. Now I don’t know what followed on … I don’t know what compensation they got or whatever but it’s the way he stood up and spoke about it.

Female participant, Cork City focus group

A Dublin-based contributor likewise felt that the ‘way’ in which Kenny delivered the apology was sincere and noted that it was also complemented by action:

Enda Kenny’s was … I really liked the way he did it, it was very sincere. And he made an action - he closed the [Irish] embassy in the Vatican City, he closed it. It’s open again now but he closed it.

Male participant, Dublin City focus group No. 1

With regard to the high-profile apology by David Cameron for Bloody Sunday, a number of our focus groups participants commented on the specific role of the media in amplifying its impact. A male contributor from Newry noted:

I think you saw on the TV what it meant to the [Bloody Sunday] victims and I know we said tonight a lot that an apology isn’t worth that much but I think when you can see how much it meant to the families, there were people crying, in a similar way to the Hillsborough disaster, when that apology was issued and you could see because it was all the fanfare, it got TV and everything. You could see what it meant to people.

Male participant, Newry focus group No.2

The findings from our survey and general population focus groups identify that apologies have an important cathartic role to play in Irish public life, particularly when dealing with harms committed in recent history. We also find
that public acceptance of apologies, and ultimately forgiveness, is highly context-dependent and heavily influenced by who delivers the apology, its precise content, and the mode of delivery. In an era when demands for accountability are omnipresent, these findings hold important lessons for those seeking to deal with the legacy of historic abuses.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to move beyond identification and analysis of accountability deficits towards closer examination of the cases in which measures have been taken to deliver accountability by means of a public apology. There has been surprisingly little empirical analysis to date of the public apologies that have been issued by state actors in Ireland in respect of poor or non-performance of public functions or past harms. By examining general population attitudes to public apologies associated with three key sites of harm on the island of Ireland, we have highlighted the significant public demand that exists for this particular form of accountability.

Our research on public apologies extends and develops a well-established theme in accountability studies, namely the way in which the perceived value of accountability measures is predicated on a complex web of contingencies. Olsen argues that ‘accountability processes provide opportunities for naming, shaming, and delegitimising, as well as for praising, justifying, and legitimising institutions and actors’ (Olsen, 2015, p. 427). In a similar vein, the apology process is both an opportunity to acknowledge and address the needs of victims, repair reputational damage, and restore moral capital and trust. However, as the focus group findings presented above identify, the process can also be a potential hazard that extenuates rather than mitigates the original harm, or completely bypasses those at whom it is directed.

Besides acknowledging the need to consider multiple perspectives (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987) and the perspective of all relevant audiences (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, 2017) our empirical work on public apologies calls attention to additional contingent variables such as who issues the apology, what precisely they say, and how they say it. In particular, we have posited the public apology process as an iterative and dialogic one, shaped and informed by two key audiences – those seeking accountability (for direct and indirect harms) and those who are deemed accountable. This raises important questions for accountability studies by extending analysis beyond blame avoidance to blame acceptance. Can an apology adequately deliver accountability or are further actions and public acts of forgiveness required for an accountability demand to be fully met? Are public apologies more likely to occur when accountability mechanisms are robust, leaving no room for blame avoidance, and what are the reputational effects of the use or over-use of apologies?
By widening the ‘audience’ lens to include consideration of the views of the general public (who are indirectly affected by past harms) we have also called attention to the broader societal relevance of a public apology process. This shifts attention away from linear attempts to address accountability deficits in public life, towards a multifocal means of communicating blame acceptance and better understanding of what works in the delivery of public apologies. Besides advancing accountability studies through considered examination of blame acceptance, our work thus illuminates the crucial final step in the accountability process – ensuring that the form and content of accountability delivered meets the needs of those to whom it is due.

Notes

1. A public inquiry led by public health expert, Gabriel Scally, found that the Health Service Executive (HSE) had outsourced screening to unapproved laboratories in the UK and US, resulting in dozens of women erroneously receiving a clean bill of health. Authorities withheld the revised test results for years, with fatal consequences for some of the patients involved. The scandal provoked the resignation of the Director of the Irish Health Service Executive in May 2018.
2. For example, Taoiseach Micheal Martin provided a state apology to the former residents of Mother and Baby Homes in January 2021.
3. For an interesting analysis of how apologies are mediated and reconstructed in the media see McNeill, Lyons, & Pehrson, 2014.
4. Some such calls for state apologies – for example, recent examples of calls for state apologies include those by families affected by the 1979 Whiddy Island oil disaster – have been declined. Other past harms, for example, concerning children and mothers placed into institutional care between the 1920s and 1990s, have (following an official inquiry) provoked state apologies.
5. See further: https://apologies-abuses-past.org.uk.
6. The Magdalene Laundries were institutions run by a number of Catholic religious orders that existed from before the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 right up to 1996, in which young girls and women were incarcerated and carried out unpaid labour, primarily laundry and needlework.
7. For analysis of the importance of victim engagement in the apology design process in transitional justice contexts see McEvoy, Bryson, and Placzek (2018).
8. According to Benoit’s theory, apologies are offered as a last resort after strategies of denial, evading responsibility, reducing the perceived offensiveness of the act, and the performance of corrective action.
9. Counties in Northern Ireland (NI), however, were purposefully over-sampled. To reach balanced, comparable samples across the two jurisdictions, half of the interviews were conducted with respondents in Northern Ireland (N = 502) and the other half (N = 505) were conducted with respondents in Republic of Ireland. On the island of Ireland as a whole, approximately 71% live in ROI and 29% in NI, as such, weighting was applied to the data set so that the findings could be presented on an all-island basis.
proportionate to population distribution. Stratification was applied based on age, gender, socio-economic group (SEG), and location. For the Northern Ireland part of the study stratification was also applied based on religious background. Of the 502 NI residents in the sample, 226 identify as coming from a Catholic background, 210 from a Protestant background, and 66 identifying with ‘other’ backgrounds.

10. In light of potential risks to participants and researchers, a detailed ethical protocol was developed to assist in the focus groups and interviews, including access to support services. The Covid 19 pandemic interrupted the final tranche of semi-structured interviews relating to the Northern Ireland conflict; these are now scheduled to take place in the latter part of 2021.

11. See Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006.

12. Statistically significant differences could be found across identity groups in self-reports on some, but not all, of these survey items. For instance, 35% of respondents identifying as being from a Catholic background in the Northern Ireland sample agreed that republicans had adequately apologised for their role in the conflict, whereas, only 12% of those from a Protestant background agreed with this statement.

13. The Cameron apology for Bloody Sunday was sharply contrasted with the apology given in the House of Commons by Boris Johnson in May 2021 for the killing of ten civilians in Ballymurphy in 1971, and in particular the non-engagement with families in advance of any public statement.

14. For example, in 2009 the outgoing Chairman of AIB Dermot Gleeson told shareholders gathered at the first AGM since the crash ‘I apologise unreservedly to you for the anxiety and distress that shareholders have suffered’. That did not dissuade one shareholder from throwing eggs at him during the AGM. At the Oireachtas banking inquiry that was held during 2014-15, a variety of apologies and statements or regret were offered by former CEOs and chairpersons (see also MacCarthaigh, 2018)

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