The Impact of Apology on Inter-group Forgiveness: A Case Study of Dolce & Gabbana's Suspected Insult on China

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Abstract: Inter-group forgiveness is a new research hotspot in recent years. It mainly refers to the positive change of attitudes, perceptions and behaviors of victim groups at the group level after conflicts. Apology, as one of the most important group behaviors affecting inter-group forgiveness, does not simply promote or hinder the impact of inter-group forgiveness. Taking the case of Dolce & Gabbana's humiliation to China as an example, this paper explores the validity of apology in Dolce & Gabbana Group and the influencing factors of apology on inter-group forgiveness (group identity, apology emotion, number of apologies, group memory and time). From the perspective of inter-group forgiveness, this paper puts forward suggestions in two aspects. For the offending group, the main solution is the sincerity of apology and the positive compensation for the offending group in the later period. For the offended groups, encourage them to actively engage with the offending groups in an efficient way to promote the emergence of empathy.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, forgiveness has gradually become a key topic in psychology. Forgiveness at the individual level can be divided into self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others. There are many definitions of forgiveness. The widely-acknowledged definition is that forgiveness at the individual level can be regarded as a complex psychological process (or the result of the process), which is a change in the feelings (reduction of anger, fear, etc.) and attitudes (reduction of prejudice, etc.) of the victim towards the offender, and the willingness to abandon hatred towards the offender [13]. Based on the study of individual forgiveness, intergroup forgiveness is further derived. Compared with individual forgiveness, intergroup forgiveness has been studied for a short time, and there is no clear definition yet. Based on the concept of intergroup forgiveness proposed by relevant studies, intergroup forgiveness can be defined as the process of forgiveness experienced at the group level after conflicts among different groups [23]. It is the reduction of the sense of revenge, anger and distrust of the members of the group towards the other group which have offended the group. Meanwhile, they consciously understand, approach and actively participate in the behavior of the other group [21,23].

The differences between individual forgiveness and inter-group forgiveness are mainly manifested in three aspects. At first, inter-group forgiveness is a group process. Effective inter-group forgiveness must occur at the group level to reduce negative feelings towards other groups in order to improve inter-group relations [9,14]. Secondly, inter-group forgiveness emphasizes the influence of historical, cultural and political factors of both groups on it, which is more sensitive to social situational factors [12]. Thirdly, the level of intergroup forgiveness is not only influenced by individual attributes such as age, but also by psychosocial attributes [11].

As a new research field, inter-group forgiveness has great research value. Especially nowadays, it has great significance to solve contradictions and conflicts among the state, enterprises and families. Dolce& Gabbana suspected insult to China is a representative case of intergroup forgiveness research. This paper uses case analysis method and content analysis method, takes Dolce& Gabbana Company and China as two inter-groups to explore the effect of intergroup

behavior of Dolce& Gabbana Group in order to solve the intergroup contradiction with China, analyzes the reasons from the perspective of influencing factors of intergroup forgiveness, and gives some suggestion.

2. Overview of this event

In November 2018, Dolce & Gabbana planned to hold the first large fashion show in China at the Shanghai World Expo Center, called the Great Show. During the warm-up period, the brand filmed a video called "Eating with Chopsticks". The video aroused strong disaffection among Chinese who assumed that the video was discriminating against China and traditional Chinese culture. The incident continued to escalate, causing an unprecedented sensation across China.

In group behavior, apology is the most important way to solve inter-group conflicts. Dolce & Gabbana has apologized three times for its actions in hopes of resolving the conflict:

The first was Stefano Gabbana's apology for what he called China an ignorant and dirty bandit on Instagram. He said, "My Ins account has been hacked. My legal office is working on this. I love China." The second apology was the cancellation of the show when the patriotic Chinese model strike led to it. The third one was the formal response and apology from Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana, the founders of D&G Group, in the form of a one-minute-25-second video.

3. Review of three apologies

3.1. First apology

After the designer's insulting remarks were exposed by netizens on Sina Weibo, many models cooperating with D&G announced their strike one after another. Stars with a huge fan base and influence publicly said they would not participate in the show. Chinese celebrities set an example, and their negative emotions about D&G's incidents also inspired their fans and even the whole Chinese people to get angry about Dolce& Gabbana humiliation of China.

3.2 Second apology

The comments on the incident have become the focus of media coverage at this stage. Meanwhile, D&G's online reputation shows a negative attitude. Netizens' negative emotions mainly include insult to China, madness, boycott, apology, discrimination, etc. It shows that the apology is still difficult to calm down the netizens, and the attention on this matter is still growing and reaching a climax.

3.3 Third apology

Comments from users of Sina Weibo on the apology video still showed negative emotions of discontent, anger, etc.

Therefore, it can be seen that Dolce & Gabbana's apology was a failure, and its behavior had a continuous negative impact. The Chinese people did not accept Dolce & Gabbana's apology, nor did they form inter-group forgiveness.

4. Influencing factors of apology on inter-group forgiveness

Apology is an inter-group behavior to seek inter-group forgiveness. Early studies show that apology has a positive effect on inter-group forgiveness [10]. However, recent studies show that apology does not promote inter-group forgiveness [16], and Dolce & Gabbana's apology also proves this viewpoint. The influence of apology on inter-group relations is complex and changeable. The following is an example of Dolce& Gabbana's apology, specifically from the perspective of inter-group forgiveness to analyze the influencing factors of apology on inter-group forgiveness.

4.1 Group identity

According to social identity theory [22], an individual's degree of identity with his group will determine his attitude for dealing with group-related events. People with high group identity tend to receive information that complies with the interests of the group [7]. They do not want to believe that the offending group has made an apology [17], or they have higher requirements for apology, so they do not think that the offender group's apology can be accepted[6], such as the sincerity of apology, the way of apology, the expression of apology, etc., any imperfection may make them refuse accepting. The low group identifiers tend to believe that the offenders have paid the price for their offending and have apologized for it, and then forgive them [17]. Simply put, there is a significant negative correlation between group identity and inter-group forgiveness, that is, the greater the intensity of group identity, the lower the level of inter-group forgiveness [5].

On the other hand, people with high group identity tend to identify with inner group members. According to social identity theory, when a group is threatened, individuals are more likely to identify with members of the inner group, showing obvious preferences for the inner group and prejudices towards the outer group [1]. Especially those with high group identity tend to think that members of inner group are more valuable [18]. That is, they tend to take a negative attitude towards offending as well as members of the inner group, which results in difficulties in inter-group forgiveness.

In the exposed chat record of D&G's designer and INS netizen, the designer Stefano Gabbana called China a pile of shit, an ignorant and dirty bandit. Since then, a lot of famous Chinese actors and models who were scheduled to participate in the event announced that they refused to participate in this show, which triggered the first climax of public opinion. Public figures, as influential members of the inner group, openly resist the external group, which will inevitably lead to the approval and imitation of the members of the own group and, to a certain extent, encourage the members of the inner group to be dissatisfied and angry about the incident. In fact, inner group preference does not necessarily lead to negative behavior towards outsiders, but research shows that after the conflict, hostility, distrust and strong inner group preference have formed among groups, which hinders the generation of inter-group forgiveness [2]. The more members of the inner-group show prejudice against Dolce& Gabbana, the more difficult it is to achieve inter-group forgiveness.

4.2 Number of apologists

The study [19] points out that when enterprises and consumers are regarded as two groups, and when enterprises apologize to consumers, the number of apologies has a significant impact on inter-group forgiveness. One apologist is more likely to arouse consumers' willingness of forgiveness than many apologists.

Dolce& Gabbana's apology is simultaneous. The two apologists are not conducive to arousing sympathetic calls with consumers. Meanwhile, inconsistencies in their actions and expressions will distract the recipients' attention. From the perspective of cognitive response, the key of consumers' forgiveness of enterprises is to realize that enterprises are "reforming" and expect that enterprises will not make mistakes in the future [19]. Although there is a clear promise in apology that "such an event will never happen again" and " Dolce& Gabbana will do the utmost to understand and respect Chinese culture", the study[19] shows that many apologists tend to reduce consumers' expectations of apology responsibility, which means that the expected value of the apologist's commitment to assume responsibility in the future and to fulfill the corresponding commitments have declined. Therefore, it is not wise for Dolce & Gabbana to choose two apologists to apologize. People's expectations and trust of enterprises to fulfill their commitments have declined, and it is not easy to form inter-group forgiveness.

4.3 Apology emotion

Wohl, Hornsey and Bennett [24] put forward a concept called infrahumanization which means that

members of inner group believe that members of aggressive groups lack the secondary emotions which is necessary for human beings [24]. Meanwhile, guilt and shame, which are also secondary emotions, have different effects on inter-group forgiveness. Only from the emotional viewpoint, ignoring the offender's characteristics, offender-victim relationship and other factors, when the offender is a member of the outside group, compared with the expression of guilt, its expression of shame will get less scolded [3,20].

In Dolce & Gabbana's apology, the two apologists expressed their feelings only by expressing they experienced long and hard "sadness" and they were "very sorry", without showing any secondary feelings of shame and guilt. In the video, the two people were stiff and expressionless and had no tone change, so that the audience cannot feel any secondary emotions. Meanwhile, the apology video was initially merely posted on Sina Weibo, which was a China's social media, but not publicly on international social networking sites, such as Twitter, so many Chinese people questioned the purpose and sincerity of the apology.

4.4 Collective memory and the degree of trust

Essentially, collective memory reflects a group's emphasis on its own continuity and the construction of its own existence. By choosing and constructing group events, we can form knowledge viewpoints in the public domain, standardize group members' views and evaluations on the past and other groups, guide group members' emotional and attitudinal orientation, and potentially affect group behavior [2]. If the outsiders have committed large-scale and serious offending against the inner group, or if the outsiders have committed the same positive type of offending against different groups for a long time, then when the outsiders have aggressed against the inner group, the negative memory of the members of the inner group will be awakened, which will aggravate their dislike of the offending and refuse to accept their apology, so it becomes very difficult to achieve inter-group forgiveness.

Meanwhile, the degree of trust in aggressive groups is an important index to measure the quality of inter-group relations, which affects the effectiveness of apology. The higher the level of trust in aggressive groups, the stronger the effectiveness of apology [15]. Trust can be associated with collective memory. The better the collective memory of one group, the higher the trust of this group, and the easier the intergroup forgiveness.

But before the incident, Dolce & Gabbana had been suspected of insulting China for many times. These incidents lead to poor collective memory of Dolce & Gabbana brand in China. Because of the bad group memory of the brand, Chinese people also have a low degree of trust in Dolce & Gabbana, so when Dolce & Gabbana apologized, it was difficult for Chinese people to fully accept their apologies, and it's difficult to believe that they sincerely apologized, which hinders the occurrence of inter-group forgiveness.

5. Interventional suggestions on the influencing factors of inter-group forgiveness

5.1 For offending groups

For aggressive groups, effective apology is the key to form cluster forgiveness. Ai[1] believes that the effectiveness of group apology includes verbal expression, behavioral strategies and motivational influence. In addition, the aggressor group should truly recognize the mistake and seriousness of their offending and apologize from the heart, rather than be forced by public opinion or political pressure. Finally, the time to apologize, that is, whether the aggressor group can apologize for their offending at the first time, rather than waiting for escalation and have to apologize to curb the escalation of the situation.

5.2 For offended groups

On the one hand, there is a close relationship between empathy and forgiveness. The emergence of

empathy can promote the deep understanding and experience of the emotional state of external groups. Therefore, it can effectively improve and alleviate hostile feelings and retaliatory attitudes, and help trigger inter-group forgiveness [4,23].

On the other hand, Tam et al. [23] pointed out that high-quality group contact can improve the relationship between groups. Therefore, organization of activities can promote the contact between the aggressor group and the victim group. In the process of contacts, both sides help each other, understand each other, establish good feelings and enhance trust, thus promoting the generation of inter-group forgiveness.

6. Conclusion

Apology plays an obvious role in the generation of inter-group forgiveness, but this role does not simply promote or hinder it. Through the analysis of this study, it is proved that group identity, the number of apologists, the emotion of apology, collective memory and trust, as well as time affect inter-group forgiveness. For different influencing factors, different measures shall be taken to achieve inter-group forgiveness. Only by fully analyzing and recognizing the influencing factors of inter-group forgiveness can we promote its better realization, which is also of great significance for solving inter-group contradictions and promoting the harmonious and stable development of the society.

In addition, forgiveness is culturally different. Studies [8] show that understanding of forgiveness varies in different cultures. In this paper, the apology of Dolce & Gabbana is not accepted, and the analysis of Chinese people's refusal to forgive Dolce & Gabbana's humiliating behavior only stands in the perspective of forgiveness in Chinese culture. At present, the academic research on intergroup forgiveness is still very limited, especially the intergroup forgiveness and cross-cultural study. In the future, based on the local cultural environment, we shall interpret the local characteristics of inter-group forgiveness, explore the influencing factors and details of inter-group forgiveness, analyze the local process mechanism of inter-group forgiveness, and build an intervention model of inter-group forgiveness based on the research results of inter-group forgiveness. This is an important task concerning social harmony and stability and also the focus I want to study in the future.

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