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Trends. The United States, People's Republic of China, and Apologies: Not Only Mind Games

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At the time of this writing, 24 United States (US) military personnel who were detained by representatives of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have been flown from the PRC and will soon be on their way home. At Issue has been an appropriate US apology. While many journalists and analysts have termed the affair no more than a game--e.g., a needless struggle of stubborn and narcissistic leaders caught up in fancied takings of umbrage--there may be something quite serious at Issue. The very issuing of an apology may have significant psychological consequences.

A public apology will be repeated many times--within the thought processes of the apologizer and the apologizee. These intrapsychic repetitions of the apology can have significant effects on self-identity, motivations, and behavioral tendencies consonant with basic principles of cognitive psychology and social cognition. The struggle between leaders and followers within the US and the PRC becomes not of saving face but of what resides behind the face.

Moreover, two other factors will affect what's behind the face of apologizer and apologizee. One involves the repetitions of the apology transmitted through the mass media, the other the intrapsychic repetitions of the apology within observers of the apology--viz., adversaries, neutrals, and allies of the two governments. All the above reciprocally interact with psychological consequences.

The psychological import of the apology should not be surprising. Although scientific psychology has recently elucidated these aspects, there is little new within this elucidation. For example, historical and philosophical treatises and accounts of confessions and self-criticism support the psychological significance of apology--even when said apology is initially insincere.

So the initiation, playing out, and ultimate resolution of the US-PRC conflict over apology is more than a frivolous game. There is no need to apologize for engaging in it. (See Barlow, J.A. (1981). Mass line leadership and thought reform in China. *American Psychologist*, 36, 300-309; Rose, S.R. (1999). Towards the development of an internalized conscience: Theoretical perspectives on socialization. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 2, 15-28; Sanger, D.E. (April 10, 2001). U.S. shies away from threats in plan standoff with China. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Schneider, C.D. (2000). What it means to be sorry: The power of apology in mediation. *Mediation Quarterly*, 17, 265-280; Steiner, C. (2000). Apology: The transactional analysis of a fundamental exchange. *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 30, 145-149.) (Keywords: Apologies, China, Diplomacy, United States.)