

# Intergroup Reconciliation: Understanding Attitudes

Authored by  
**mohammed loot**

November 20, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammed loot (2025). *Intergroup Reconciliation: Understanding Attitudes*. Psychepedia.  
Retrieved from <https://psychepedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=25269>

## Defining Intergroup Reconciliation and Attitude Formation

Intergroup reconciliation is conceptualized as a long-term societal process aimed at transforming deeply antagonistic relationships between groups that have been involved in sustained conflict, often characterized by violence, injustice, and trauma. This crucial process moves beyond a mere cessation of hostilities or the signing of peace treaties, striving instead for the establishment of mutual understanding, trust, and positive interdependence, fundamentally altering the nature of the relationship itself. **Attitudes toward intergroup reconciliation** represent the cognitive, affective, and behavioral evaluations individuals hold regarding the desirability and feasibility of engaging in this transformative process with a former adversary group. These attitudes are complex, multifaceted constructs, shaped profoundly by the individual's socio-political context, personal experiences of conflict, and the psychological legacy of past harms. Given the inherent risks associated with trusting a former enemy, attitudes toward reconciliation often sit on a precarious continuum between pragmatic acceptance of peace and deep-seated resistance driven by fear, resentment, or demands for retributive justice, necessitating careful study of the factors that push individuals toward one extreme or the other.

The formation of attitudes toward reconciliation is heavily influenced by the prevailing social representations and **collective memory** within the ingroup. Societal narratives, often institutionalized through education, media, and political discourse, dictate how past conflicts are remembered, who is assigned the role of victim or perpetrator, and what constitutes a just resolution. If the dominant narrative emphasizes unwavering victimization and the moral superiority of the ingroup, attitudes favoring reconciliation--which often requires acknowledging shared responsibility or relinquishing certain claims--are significantly curtailed. This is because reconciliation is often perceived as a threat to the established moral hierarchy and the integrity of the ingroup identity. Conversely, narratives that promote empathy, highlight common humanity, or stress the shared burden of future stability tend to foster more positive and constructive attitudes. It is crucial to recognize that reconciliation attitudes are not static; they fluctuate dynamically in response to political events, perceived security threats, and symbolic actions of the outgroup, demonstrating a continuous interplay between deeply held historical beliefs and immediate contextual pressures that can rapidly shift public opinion.

Furthermore, reconciliation attitudes are distinct from general peace attitudes, a differentiation critical for accurate psychological measurement. While a desire for peace merely implies a wish for the absence of violence and physical harm, **reconciliation attitudes** involve a proactive psychological readiness to engage in relational repair, which includes elements such as forgiveness, apology, and the willingness to invest significant resources--both emotional and material--into building a shared future. This distinction is vital because groups may desire peace and stability but simultaneously reject reconciliation if they perceive the latter as demanding too high a social or psychological cost, such as compromising core identity values or abandoning

demands for strict accountability and retribution. Therefore, measuring attitudes toward reconciliation requires assessing specific underlying components like trust, willingness to engage in high-quality contact, openness to shared history revision, and support for transitional justice mechanisms, rather than simply gauging generalized support for non-violence or political stability.

## Psychological Determinants of Reconciliation Attitudes

Several core psychological mechanisms dictate whether individuals adopt positive or negative attitudes toward intergroup reconciliation, transcending simple political calculation. One primary determinant is the perception of **threat**, which operates on both realistic and symbolic levels. When the outgroup is perceived as posing a high symbolic threat (e.g., threat to cultural values, language, or identity) or a high realistic threat (e.g., threat to physical safety, economic resources, or territorial integrity), attitudes toward reconciliation deteriorate rapidly, as psychological defense mechanisms prioritize ingroup protection and cohesion over relational repair. This threat perception is often intentionally magnified by political rhetoric that essentializes the outgroup as inherently dangerous, untrustworthy, or morally inferior, thereby justifying continued psychological distance and reinforcing antagonistic attitudes. Effective reconciliation efforts must therefore include verifiable strategies designed to reduce perceived vulnerability and demonstrate credible, long-term commitments from the outgroup regarding future security and cooperation, moving beyond mere verbal assurances.

Another highly significant psychological determinant is the concept of **justice**, specifically the perceived fairness of the conflict's resolution and its aftermath. Attitudes toward reconciliation are strongly mediated by whether individuals feel that procedural justice (the fairness of the processes used to resolve the conflict, such as negotiations or truth commissions) and distributive justice (the fairness of the outcomes, including resource allocation, reparations, and political representation) have been adequately achieved. For victim groups, reconciliation is often critically contingent upon the acknowledgement of past suffering and the establishment of accountability for perpetrators, which may involve trials, truth commissions, or symbolic reparations. If reconciliation is perceived as a premature attempt to gloss over deeply felt injustices without adequate redress, it is likely to be met with fierce resistance, as it violates fundamental moral principles of equity, fairness, and retribution, leading to the rejection of any proposed peace settlement.

The psychological concept of **empathy** also plays a powerful, though frequently challenging, role in shaping reconciliation attitudes. The ability to engage in perspective-taking--to understand the emotional pain, legitimate concerns, or structural hardships faced by the former adversary--is consistently identified as a strong predictor of willingness to reconcile and forgive. However, empathy is often highly restricted following intense, identity-based conflict due to psychological mechanisms like moral exclusion, where the outgroup is placed outside the boundaries of moral consideration and human compassion. Furthermore, forced or premature empathy induction can

be counterproductive and even backfire, especially among victims who may perceive it as a subtle attempt to minimize their suffering or coerce them into premature forgiveness. Successful interventions aim not for complete identification with the other side, but rather for mutual perspective-taking, allowing both groups to understand the narrative and emotional landscape of the other without necessarily adopting it as their own subjective truth, thereby fostering mutual respect rather than forced emotional convergence.

## The Role of Group Identity and Historical Narratives

Group identity serves as the foundational lens through which all reconciliation proposals are filtered, evaluated, and accepted or rejected. Strong identification with the ingroup often correlates with higher levels of ingroup bias, greater psychological investment in the conflict's outcome, and consequently, greater resistance to reconciliation, particularly if reconciliation is framed by political elites as requiring the abandonment of core ingroup values or the dilution of established historical claims. Social identity theory suggests that groups strive to maintain a positive and distinctive social identity; engaging in reconciliation--especially if it involves admitting past wrongdoing or accepting shared responsibility--can fundamentally threaten this desired positive distinctiveness, leading to psychological reactance and defensive rejection of the process. Political leaders frequently exploit this powerful link between identity maintenance and conflict continuation by framing reconciliation efforts as a betrayal of ingroup loyalty or a compromise of foundational group principles, thereby mobilizing widespread opposition among high identifiers.

**Historical narratives** are the bedrock upon which collective identity rests, and they profoundly influence attitudes toward the future relationship with the former adversary. Conflicts are sustained not only by present grievances but also by competing historical accounts that justify past actions and define the moral status of each group in relation to the conflict. Reconciliation requires a significant degree of convergence or mutual recognition regarding these historical narratives, which is perhaps the most intellectually and emotionally challenging aspect of the entire process. If one group maintains an unwavering narrative of absolute innocence and the other of absolute guilt, reconciliation attitudes will remain fundamentally polarized and resistant to integration. The process of developing positive attitudes hinges on the gradual, often painful, development of a shared, dual-perspective narrative that acknowledges the suffering and legitimate concerns of both sides, effectively moving away from monolithic, self-serving historical accounts toward a more complex, shared understanding of the past conflict and its origins.

Furthermore, the concepts of **collective guilt** and collective shame significantly mediate reconciliation attitudes among perpetrator groups. For members of the perpetrator group, genuine reconciliation attitudes require facing the collective responsibility for past atrocities and injustices, a process that can induce intense psychological discomfort, cognitive dissonance, and powerful defensive reactions aimed at protecting the ingroup's moral standing. Research indicates that

attempts to deny, minimize, or rationalize past harms are common defense mechanisms used to protect a positive group image, thereby effectively blocking positive reconciliation attitudes and sincere apology. Conversely, when perpetrator groups are guided toward constructive guilt--acknowledging responsibility while focusing the resultant discomfort on repairing the relationship and making amends--they are far more likely to support gestures of apology, reparations, and concrete steps toward reconciliation, demonstrating a crucial shift from defensive avoidance to constructive, forward-looking engagement.

## Emotional Processes and Willingness to Reconcile

Emotions are central, often primary, drivers of attitudes toward intergroup reconciliation, frequently operating far more powerfully than purely rational calculations of political cost and benefit. Negative emotions such as anger, hatred, resentment, and deep-seated fear, which are often deeply institutionalized and culturally reinforced during conflict, serve to maintain psychological distance and justify non-cooperation. Anger, particularly, drives the desire for retribution and strict justice, making the unconditional acceptance or forgiveness required by certain reconciliation models seem psychologically impossible or morally irresponsible. Therefore, one critical step in fostering positive attitudes is the successful regulation and transformation of these entrenched conflict-related emotions. This emotional regulation does not necessarily mean extinguishing intense feelings, but rather shifting their functional focus from destructive retribution toward constructive relational repair and future-oriented cooperation, allowing individuals to mentally move past the immediate desire for revenge.

The experience of **collective trauma** and the associated fear of renewed victimization is another major emotional barrier to reconciliation. For victim groups, embracing reconciliation involves a profound degree of vulnerability, requiring them to trust a group that historically caused them immense, often existential, harm. This fear of renewed victimization often manifests as highly resistant attitudes toward measures like normalization of contact, shared governance, or the integration of security forces. Effective reconciliation strategies must address this heavy emotional residue by ensuring robust, verifiable security guarantees and establishing mechanisms that demonstrate the outgroup's genuine and credible commitment to non-repetition of violence. Only when the prevailing emotional state shifts from chronic fear and hatred to tentative hope and perceived safety can positive attitudes toward relational interdependence begin to take root and sustain themselves against external shocks.

Conversely, positive emotions, such as hope, trust, and compassion, are powerful facilitators of reconciliation attitudes. **Hope**, defined as the belief that a better, mutually beneficial future relationship is genuinely possible despite past antagonism, encourages individuals to psychologically invest in the transformative process rather than retreating into cynicism. Trust, especially generalized trust extending beyond immediate ingroup members to include the former

adversary, serves as the psychological lubricant necessary for cooperation and the risk-taking inherent in reconciliation efforts. These positive affective states can be strategically fostered through carefully designed intergroup contact interventions that move beyond mere superficial interaction to promote meaningful self-disclosure, shared vulnerability, and the recognition of shared, superordinate goals, thereby helping to humanize the former adversary and significantly reduce the emotional intensity of antagonism and prejudice.

## Structural and Contextual Factors Influencing Attitudes

Attitudes toward reconciliation are rarely solely determined by individual psychological states but are deeply embedded within the structural and political context of the post-conflict society. The political climate, particularly the behavior and rhetoric of elite leaders, exerts immense top-down influence. When political leaders adopt a consistent, bipartisan, and sustained approach favoring reconciliation, utilizing inclusive language, and modeling cooperative behavior across ethnic divides, public attitudes tend to follow suit due to processes of social learning and elite cueing. Conversely, political entrepreneurs who mobilize support by actively exploiting ethnic or historical grievances, often utilizing zero-sum rhetoric, can rapidly undermine years of painstaking reconciliation efforts, demonstrating the extreme fragility of positive attitudes in polarized or unstable environments where political incentives favor division.

Furthermore, the institutional architecture of the post-conflict state plays a critical role in validating or undermining reconciliation attitudes. The stability of reconciliation attitudes is often directly tied to the perceived effectiveness, fairness, and legitimacy of institutions responsible for enforcing peace agreements, delivering transitional justice, and ensuring equitable resource distribution and political representation. If governing institutions are perceived as biased, corrupt, or incapable of protecting vulnerable minority groups, attitudes toward reconciliation will sour rapidly, as individuals conclude that the peace process offers no genuine benefits or long-term security guarantees. Pervasive economic disparity and inequality between the formerly warring groups, if left structurally unaddressed, also act as powerful structural barriers, fueling resentment, reinforcing zero-sum thinking about resource allocation, and thereby inhibiting the development of positive attitudes necessary for long-term cooperative coexistence.

The role of external actors, such as international organizations, multinational peacekeeping forces, or mediating states, also significantly shapes public attitudes toward the reconciliation process. While external pressure or incentives can be effective in temporarily pushing groups toward signing formal peace agreements, they cannot manufacture genuine, internally motivated reconciliation attitudes. However, external actors can provide crucial support by funding grassroots reconciliation projects, ensuring accountability mechanisms are robust and independent, and offering neutral platforms for dialogue and negotiation. The perception that external intervention is impartial, consistent, and genuinely supportive of local ownership of the peace process is vital; if intervention

is viewed as biased, self-serving, or imposing externally generated solutions, local populations may develop strong resistant attitudes as a means of asserting sovereignty, cultural autonomy, and group self-determination.

## Manifestations of Reconciliation Attitudes: Forgiveness and Apology

Attitudes toward reconciliation manifest concretely through support for specific relational behaviors, most notably **intergroup forgiveness** and intergroup apology, which serve as psychological benchmarks of progress. Forgiveness, in the context of intergroup relations, is a complex attitude shift by the victim group, involving the voluntary relinquishing of resentment, bitterness, and the desire for revenge, and the adoption of more positive, future-oriented emotions toward the perpetrator group, without necessarily requiring forgetting the injustice itself. Attitudes favoring forgiveness are critical for reconciliation, yet they are highly conditional. They are typically contingent upon the perceived sincerity, comprehensiveness, and timing of the apology, and the demonstrable commitment of the perpetrator group to behavioral change and non-repetition of past harms. If forgiveness is perceived as cheap, forced, or premature, it is often rejected outright as a violation of deeply held justice principles and a minimization of the original trauma.

Conversely, attitudes toward **intergroup apology** among perpetrator groups reflect their willingness to acknowledge collective responsibility for past harms and to engage in genuine relational repair. A positive attitude toward apology involves recognizing the moral injury inflicted and expressing genuine remorse, often requiring overcoming significant psychological barriers of defensive denial, cognitive dissonance, or collective shame concerning the group's history. The effectiveness of an apology in fostering positive reconciliation attitudes among victims is determined by several factors: the status of the person offering the apology (higher status or official mandate is better), the perceived comprehensiveness of the acknowledgement (full admission of fault is better than partial), and the inclusion of tangible commitments to restitution or structural repair. An apology viewed merely as a tactical or political maneuver, lacking emotional sincerity or moral commitment, will inevitably fail to shift victim attitudes toward forgiveness.

These behavioral manifestations are often supported and facilitated by mechanisms of **transitional justice**, such as truth commissions, reparations programs, or specialized courts. Attitudes toward truth commissions, for example, are key indicators of reconciliation readiness within a society. Positive attitudes reflect a belief that revealing the full truth, even painful and damaging truths about both sides, is a necessary prerequisite for healing, restoring dignity, and rebuilding generalized trust. For perpetrator groups, positive attitudes toward truth commissions indicate a willingness to engage in painful self-reflection and accept accountability. For victim groups, support for these mechanisms signals a prioritization of truth, acknowledgement, and relational repair over purely punitive or retributive justice, thereby demonstrating a foundational shift in attitudes necessary for long-term, sustainable relational repair and coexistence.

## Promoting Positive Attitudes and Sustainable Peace

The promotion and stabilization of positive attitudes toward intergroup reconciliation requires multi-layered, sustained, and coordinated interventions targeting both deep-seated psychological barriers and reinforcing structural inequalities. Education is arguably the most fundamental and long-term tool, involving the critical revision of national curricula to incorporate dual-perspective history that transparently acknowledges the narratives, suffering, and legitimate concerns of both sides, effectively moving away from partisan or ethnocentric instruction that demonizes the other. Educational initiatives specifically aimed at fostering critical thinking, perspective-taking skills, and media literacy can help inoculate broader populations against the emotionally manipulative and divisive rhetoric often utilized by conflict entrepreneurs, thereby stabilizing positive attitudes against sudden external manipulation.

**Intergroup contact theory** provides a robust and empirically supported framework for direct intervention, suggesting that carefully structured, high-quality contact can significantly improve reconciliation attitudes. For contact to be successful, it must move beyond superficial interaction; it needs to involve four crucial conditions: shared, superordinate goals that necessitate cooperation, equal status between participants within the contact situation, explicit institutional support for the interaction, and opportunities for deep self-disclosure leading to the personalization of the outgroup members. Successful contact reduces intergroup anxiety, increases mutual empathy, and ultimately leads to the cognitive processes of either decategorization (seeing the other as an individual rather than a group member) or recategorization (seeing both groups as part of a larger, shared superordinate identity), both of which are necessary for profound and durable positive attitude change.

Finally, sustaining positive attitudes toward reconciliation requires continuous investment in peace infrastructure, civic capacity building, and cross-cutting societal institutions. This involves supporting grassroots organizations that facilitate sustained dialogue, promoting cross-group economic interdependence through shared markets and labor, and ensuring the consistent, impartial application of the rule of law across all ethnic and political lines. Attitudes toward reconciliation are highly fragile and can regress quickly in the face of renewed security threats, political instability, or perceived injustice or cheating by the former adversary. Therefore, institutionalizing mechanisms that consistently reinforce positive interdependence, shared identity, mutual security, and equitable outcomes is essential to ensure that positive attitudes translate into durable behavioral commitment and ultimately, sustainable peace that transcends generational divides. The transition from negative, antagonistic attitudes to positive, collaborative evaluations is a continuous, rather than finite, process requiring vigilance, long-term investment, and profound moral courage from all societal levels.