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Cross-cultural differences in apology

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the effects of national culture (U.S., China, and Korea) and interpersonal relationship type (a stranger and a friend) on apology. Findings revealed that participants ($N = 376$) from the three cultures differed in their perceptions of the offended person's emotional reaction and their propensities toward apology use (i.e., desire, obligation, and intention to apologize, as well as their perception of normative apology use). Regardless of their cultures, participants showed stronger obligation and intention to apologize to a stranger than to a friend. With regard to the intention to apologize, both American and Korean participants showed a greater discrepancy between themselves and their estimate of most people in their own culture than did Chinese participants. Although participants from the three cultures did not differ in their propensities toward apology use for a friend, both American and Chinese participants showed greater discrepancy than did Korean participants for feeling obliged to apologize to a stranger. For intention to apologize to a stranger, both American and Korean participants, compared to Chinese, showed greater discrepancy between themselves and their estimate of most people in their own culture. Other findings and implications thereof are discussed in more detail in the paper.

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1. Introduction

Apology is offered when one's act causes harm or discomfort to another person. Although apology is ubiquitous across various cultures, cultures can differ in its usage and functions (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Wolfson, Marmor, & Jones, 1989). When causing discomfort to others, people of different cultures may differ in the extent to which they want to and intend to apologize. It has been discussed that cultural differences in apology rules have the potential to cause foreigners to be seen as communicatively incompetent for using or not using apology in accordance with the host country culture (e.g., Garcia, 1989; Jung, 1999; Mir, 1992; Olshtain, 1989; Wolfson et al., 1989; Yu, 1999). For example, Jung's (1999) study of Korean learners of English language found that because Korean second language learners used their first language rules and pragmatic knowledge when delivering an apology in English, they often experienced difficulty in accomplishing their communication goals when interacting with others in English. Understanding cross-cultural differences in apology can be a way of improving one's communication competence in interacting with others from different cultures.

The current research takes an exploratory approach to examine apology use among Americans, Chinese, and Korean native speakers with regard to their reactions in a potentially apologetic situation. More specifically, the study tries to answer the question of how culture and the type of relationship between an offended person and an offender would affect

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the offender's reactions to a potentially apologetic situation, and whether or not cultural dimension such as individualism and collectivism can be useful for explaining differences in apology. It is expected that people in different cultures vary in their desire, intention, and obligation to apologize, as well as their perception of normative use of apology (hereafter, norm to apologize), all of which in the current paper are referred to collectively as propensities toward apology. When an offending act is done to an in-group *versus* an out-group member, offenders in different cultures are expected to show different levels of propensities toward apology. Furthermore, cultural differences are also expected in the extent to which individuals' own propensities toward apology differ from their estimates of others' propensities toward apology. Finally, cultures are expected to differ regarding the offended person's emotional reaction when the offender does nothing to ameliorate his or her offense.

For comparing cultural differences in apology, the current study recruited participants in the U.S., China, and Korea for three reasons. First, cultural comparisons in propensities toward apology are scarce and information concerning how Chinese and Koreans differ from Americans is even scarcer. Some past studies on cultural comparisons included Japan and the U.S. (e.g., Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986). However, the number of studies comparing either Chinese or Koreans with Americans is much fewer (e.g., Park & Guan, 2006; Park, Lee, & Song, 2005). Second, there has been an increasing number of interactions among people from different cultures. For example, in the 2006–2007 academic year, students from China ($n = 67,723$) and Korea ($n = 62,392$) together constituted 22.32% of all international students ($n = 582,984$) in the U.S. (Institute of International Education, 2007). Considering the substantial portion of Chinese and Korean international students in the U.S. striving for academic success, information concerning how Chinese and Koreans differ (or do not differ) from Americans with regard to apologies has the potential to help people prepare for intercultural encounters. Third, the current study aimed to examine whether people in different cultures would show different propensities toward apologies when interacting with an in-group member or an out-group member. The distinction between an in-group member and an out-group member is one of the key characteristics of individualism–collectivism. The U.S. has been regarded as an individualist culture, and China and Korea have been considered collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). Numerous studies have treated these cultures as such and have conducted cultural comparisons on a range of variables of interest. Although China and Korea often have been considered collectivist cultures, the two are not necessarily identical regarding collectivist tendencies and many other aspects of communication. Research has shown similarities as well as differences between Chinese and Koreans (e.g., Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995; Sastry & Ross, 1998; Williams et al., 1997). Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier (2002) showed that, for collectivist tendencies, China was higher than the U.S., while Korea was not significantly higher than the U.S. On the other hand, when compared to the U.S., both China and Korea tended to be lower in individualist tendencies (Oyserman et al., 2002). Based on this meta-analysis and past research findings, in the current study China is considered a collectivist culture and the U.S. an individualist culture. Thus, as a way of representing the variations on the dimensions of collectivism and individualism, Korea is included in the data collection and analyses.

1.1. Culture and apology

Apology is one of the remedial devices to reestablish social harmony among interactants (Goffman, 1971). By apologizing, an offender takes responsibility for an offensive act and expresses regret for an undesirable event (Schlenker & Darby, 1981). If apology is universal in form, function, and situational applications, people need not fear the additional consequences of using an inadequate apology to someone from a different culture. This, however, is usually not the case. Although cross-cultural literature on apology shows that the concept of apology is pancultural, cross-cultural differences exist in the components of apology and situations that elicit apology (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Owen, 1983; Wolfson et al., 1989). Past research comparing American and East Asian cultures shows mixed findings on cross-cultural differences in various aspects of apology. Although Japanese tended to apologize more frequently and more explicitly than did Americans, a possibility was also suggested that Americans were likelier to apologize in a public setting (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986). On the other hand, Chinese people had weaker intention to apologize than did Americans (Park & Guan, 2006), while Koreans showed more positive attitudes and normative perceptions about apologizing than did Americans (Park et al., 2005).

Apology is called a social lubricant (Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986), which indicates that the primary function of apology is to repair a harmed relationship between offended and offender. Different cultures may employ different relationship maintenance and repair strategies for their in-group members *versus* out-group members. That is, depending on the type of interpersonal relationship between the offended and the offender, different levels of effort to repair the relationship can be expected. Individualism and collectivism are dimensions commonly used in cross-cultural research, and one of the core elements of collectivist cultures is priority of individuals' mutual bond with their in-group members, which results in an emphasis on maintaining the harmonious relationship within in-groups (Kagitçibasi, 1994; Triandis, 1995). In-groups are "groups of people about whose welfare one is concerned, with whom one is willing to cooperate without demanding equitable returns, and separation from whom leads to discomfort or even pain" (Triandis, 1988, p. 75). Although collectivist cultures can vary with respect to whom is included in the in-groups, the likely in-group members common to many collectivist cultures are family members and friends. Out-group members, on the other hand, include strangers whose welfare is not of much concern to an individual, or opponents whose welfare can even conflict with that of in-group members. Individualist cultures are characterized by greater emphasis on individuals' uniqueness and autonomy and on prioritizing personal goals over group goals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Consequently, group membership is less important for individualists and the distinction of in-group and out-group members is less salient. Said differently,

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