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When apologies work: How matching apology components to victims' self-construals facilitates forgiveness

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ABSTRACT

Apologies are useful social tools that can act as catalysts in the resolution of conflict and inspire forgiveness. Yet as numerous real-world blunders attest, apologies are not always effective. Whereas many lead to forgiveness and reconciliation, others simply fall on deaf ears. Despite the fact that apologies differ in their effectiveness, most research has focused on apologies as dichotomous phenomena wherein a victim either (a) receives an apology or (b) does not. Psychological research has yet to elucidate which *components* of apologies are most effective, and for *whom*. The present research begins to address this gap by testing the theory that perpetrators' apologies are most likely to inspire victim forgiveness when their components align with victims' self-construals. Regression and hierarchical linear modeling analyses from two studies support the primary hypotheses. As predicted, victims reacted most positively to apologies that were congruent with their self-construals.

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Introduction

Conflict is a ubiquitous social phenomenon that transcends people, cultures, and contexts (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2009). Although conflict is inevitable, the question of how conflict is managed holds critical implications for its consequences. In a world of global opportunities and global threats, the way conflict is managed can have such diverse consequences as escalation and war or forgiveness and peace. Fortunately, a sizable literature in social psychology and organizational behavior has developed to understand and explain the conditions under which conflict leads to destructive versus productive outcomes (De Dreu, 2006; De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Peterson & Behfar, 2003).

One factor that has been argued to play a vital role in how conflict is managed by offenders is apology (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Sitkin & Bies, 1993). In the introduction to his landmark book *On Apology*, psychiatrist Aaron Lazare opens by referring to apology as “One of the most profound human interactions” (Lazare, 2004, p. 1). On a national scale, apologies have helped to heal the wounds of the Holocaust, the Nanking Massacre, and many other atrocities (Brooks, 1999). Among individuals, apologies have helped to repair countless relationships and restore harmony (Scher & Darley, 1997; Tavuchis, 1991). Within organizational contexts, apologies can be used to resolve interpersonal disputes,

improve customer experiences, and enhance leader effectiveness (Liao, 2007; Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004; Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid, & Elving, 2006). Nonetheless, scholars and laypeople alike have recognized the potential for apologies to fail. Apologies have been referred to as “Highly risky strategies. . . [that] can make a bad situation worse” (Kellogg, 2007, p. 21). Empirical research similarly supports the idea that apologies are not always effective (Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004), drawing attention to the question, “Why is it that some apologies succeed whereas others fall on deaf ears?”.

Central to the question of why some apologies succeed where others fail is a recognition that all apologies are not created equal. Rather, apologies can contain different sets of elements – referred to here as *components* – that may affect how victims react to them. For instance, some apologies might focus on the compensation of a victim while others might focus on showing empathy. Apology components have received theoretical attention in Sociology (Tavuchis, 1991), Law (Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986), and Psychiatry (Lazare, 2004), yet with few exceptions (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Santelli, Struthers, & Eaton, 2009; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Forster, & Montada, 2004) they have received scant empirical attention in Psychology. Rather, research in Psychology has traditionally examined apology as a strictly dichotomous phenomenon wherein a victim either (a) receives an apology or (b) does not. For instance, Brown, Wohl, and Exline (2008) examined apology effectiveness by assigning participants to “apology” versus “no apology” conditions. Similarly, Liao (2007) tested for the presence of apology following a customer service failure by asking respondents if an apology was or was not received (see also Frantz & Bennisson,

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2005; McCullough et al., 1998; Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008; Tomlinson et al., 2004). In these and other studies, the prototypical methodology is to contrast a simple “I’m sorry” against a “no apology” condition, rather than to consider the implications of the specific apology components that victims receive. This tendency to dichotomize is systemic not only for apologies but also for justifications, denials, and related social accounts. For instance, in their meta-analysis on the effectiveness of justifications versus excuses, Shaw, Wild, and Colquitt (2003) model the contexts surrounding social accounts, but do not codify or model the content of the accounts themselves. Thus, dichotomization appears to transcend research on social accounts.

The literature’s limited conceptualization of apologies as dichotomous is problematic for a number of reasons. First, this conceptualization is too broad and atheoretical to allow for a precise understanding of why apologies work. Second, a dichotomous view fails to consider the fact that apologies are offered to specific victims who likely differ in terms of what they expect to hear, and thus does not integrate victim psychological states into the apology process. Third, the dichotomous approach to apology limits the specificity with which apology interventions can be recommended in response to conflict. A consideration of apology components, for instance, could allow managers, conflict mediators, spouses, parents, and other offenders to target their apologies with meaningful statements such as expressions of empathy or acknowledgments of violated norms.

In examining the psychology of apology components, the current research focuses on the integral role of victims’ self-construals in the link between apologies and forgiveness. Briefly defined, self-construal relates to how individuals perceive their relationships with other people. Recent conceptualizations of self-construal have described a tripartite model, consisting of the independent, relational, and collective selves (Kashima et al., 1995). Self-construal has been implicated in a wide range of cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (e.g. Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; Cross & Madson, 1997; Johnson & Chang, 2006; Johnson, Selenta, & Lord, 2006). It has also recently been shown to affect perceptions of interpersonal conflict (Gelfand et al., 2001). However, its implications for perceptions of and reactions to apologies have yet to be examined. Forgiveness is examined as a key outcome variable for both its ubiquity in the apology literature and its implications for important individual and interpersonal outcomes such as well-being (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008), stress (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001), and helping behavior (Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005).

The general proposition of this paper, discussed at length below, is that forgiveness will be enhanced when offenders’ apologies are consistent with victims’ self-views. Specifically, it is hypothesized that victims who emphasize the independent, relational, and collective self-construals will be most likely to forgive their offenders following *offers of compensation*, *expressions of empathy*, and *acknowledgments of violated rules/norms*, respectively. Two studies have been conducted to test these hypotheses. In Study 1, a direct assessment technique is used to examine the relationship between self-construal and participants’ perceptions of what constitutes a “good apology.” In Study 2, a policy capturing methodology is used to confirm and extend the findings from Study 1 using hierarchical linear modeling analyses.

Apology components

Apology components have received only scattered empirical consideration within Psychology (e.g. Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Schmitt et al., 2004). However, they have received greater attention from a number of theorists throughout the humanities and

social sciences (Avruch & Wang, 2005; Cunningham, 2004; Goffman, 1967; Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; James, 2006; Lazare, 2004; Scher & Darley, 1997; Tavuchis, 1991). Across such fields as Law, Sociology, and Psychiatry, scholars have focused on three apology components that are particularly relevant to the current research: offers of compensation, expressions of empathy, and acknowledgments of violated rules/norms. Despite considerable consensus regarding these components across fields, few attempts have been made to integrate the relevant research. To this end, a review of these components is presented in detail below.

Apologies as *offers of compensation* are focused on the restoration of equity through exchange. That is, they are focused on correcting the balance of a relationship through some type of action, either specific or general. For instance, offenders can offer to provide their victims with specific, tangible goods (e.g. “[I] could go and see if I can get you another...”; Schmitt et al., 2004, p. 470) or offer more generally to take whatever action is needed (e.g. “If there is any way I can make it up to you please let me know.”; Scher & Darley, 1997, p. 132). In many qualitative studies from Law, Sociology, and Psychology, compensation is mentioned as a vital component of the apology process (Goffman, 1967; Lazare, 2004; O’Hara & Yarn, 2002; Schlenker & Darby, 1981; Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986). A number of quantitative studies support this claim. Offers of compensation have been shown to relate to victims’ impressions of their offenders, impressions of the conflict, and emotional states (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Conlon & Murray, 1996; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schmitt et al., 2004). The importance of offers of compensation can be summed up by Bishop Desmond Tutu, who once noted that “If you take my pen and say you are sorry, but don’t give me the pen back, nothing has happened” (Tutu, 2004). The importance of offers of compensation can be extended to organizational contexts as well, where compensation is frequently offered as a form of apology to alleviate the negative effects of organizational injustice (Okimoto & Tyler, 2007). It should be noted that although offers of compensation prototypically reference tangible goods, socio-emotional compensation presents a parallel opportunity for the restoration of equity. For instance, an employee who apologizes for subversive behavior during a meeting could offer to show overt respect for a boss at the next meeting. Thus, compensation can reference either tangible or more emotionally driven compensatory offers.

While offers of compensation focus on equity and exchange, *expressions of empathy* focus on relational issues. They demonstrate offenders’ recognition of and concern for their victims’ suffering, both socio-emotionally and cognitively (cf. Davis, 1983). From a socio-emotional perspective, offenders might demonstrate empathy by expressing warmth toward their victims or compassion for their suffering. From a cognitive perspective, offenders might display an understanding of the victim’s point of view or the consequences of the offense for the victim’s well-being. As with offers of compensation, research on expressions of empathy can be found in Sociology (Goffman, 1967), Psychology (Lazare, 2004; Schlenker & Darby, 1981), and many other fields (Cohen, 1999; Tavuchis, 1991; Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986). Recent advances in management theory have likewise emphasized the importance of expressing empathy for employees, noting how relationality can help to ease conflict and facilitate cooperation (Gelfand, Major, Raver, Nishii, & O’Brien, 2006). Schmitt et al. (2004) empirically linked expressions of empathy to victims’ perceptions of their perpetrators, and operationalized the component through the phrase “I feel really sorry for what I have done. I know how you feel now” (p. 469). Kotani (2002) provided additional theoretical support for this component by emphasizing its integral role in non-Western contexts. The significance of expressions of empathy was recently evidenced during the trial of a Catholic Bishop for charges of abuse. The plaintiffs were awarded \$23.4 million dollars, but demanded that the

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