



The effects of attributions of intent and apology on forgiveness: When saying sorry may not help the story[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Despite the oft-cited positive effects of an apology on forgiveness, forgiveness does not always follow. In three studies we tested the ironic notion that, following an interpersonal transgression, an apology following an attribution of intent might further hinder, rather than benefit, the forgiveness process. The findings of three studies were systematically replicated and supported our primary prediction that, following attributions of intent, saying sorry does not always lead to forgiveness. When offenders intentionally committed a transgression, forgiveness was less likely following an apology. However, when offenses were unintentional, forgiveness was more likely following an apology. We also showed that these effects were explained by participants' impression of the transgressor.

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Although often harmonious in nature, relationships are sometimes hindered by interpersonal offenses that can easily escalate into more serious and intractable conflicts. Despite the potential damage that transgressions can cause, relationships are not always irreparably damaged by them. Forgiveness is one process that demonstrates promise in rebuilding relationships interrupted by interpersonal conflict (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Eaton & Struthers, 2006; Fincham, 2000; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). As a motivated decision by victims of an offense to let go of their legitimate right to anger and resentment toward the transgressor and to evaluate the offender favorably, forgiveness is believed to be a process that is influenced by two categories of social cognitive factors. On the one hand, certain intrapersonal factors situated within injured parties such as their attributions for the transgressors' responsibility for the offense can influence forgiveness (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; Fincham, 2000; McCullough et al., 2003; Weiner, 2006; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). On

the other hand, forgiveness is also influenced by interpersonal factors located outside of the injured party, such as an apology from the offender (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Frantz & Bennis, 2005; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). Research examining these influencing factors suggests that individuals are more likely to forgive a transgressor if they avoid holding the transgressor responsible for the offense and if the transgressor is apologetic.

Notwithstanding the potential benefits of these factors in facilitating the forgiveness process, forgiveness is not always possible (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). Given the potentially damaging consequences of transgressions and the potentially beneficial consequences of forgiveness on relationships, it is important to better understand the boundary conditions and mechanisms under which the forgiveness process operates. Some scholars have argued that victims may only be able to forgive those who have directly harmed them (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998), whereas others have proposed that it may be morally wrong to forgive certain offenses such as murder, sexual abuse, and genocide (Minow, 1998; Wiesenthal, 1998), and still others have noted that the severity of the offense and justice values may be crucial to the forgiveness process (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Exline et al., 2003; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004).

Another factor that is related to the degree of responsibility inferred for an offense and might explain why, following a judgment of responsibility, some offenses are more or less forgivable is an injured party's attributions of a transgressor's intentions (Fincham & Jasper, 1980; Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Malle

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& Knobe, 1997; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1993). When individuals form intentions to act, they have essentially committed themselves to achieving a desired goal (Gollwitzer, 1999). In the case of a deliberate transgression, this means that one has committed oneself to willfully achieving harm. Given that the consequences of such intentions can translate into devastating effects for the victim including humiliation, moral indignation, and loss of face (Goffman, 1955; Heider, 1958; Josephs, Bosson, & Jacobs, 2003; Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001), it is not surprising that intentional transgressions can make victims of an offense cautious and self-protective (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989; Maltby & Day, 2004; Steele, 1988). Moreover, given that intentional actions leave little room for situational causes, they are also likely to lead to the formation of dispositional inferences about offenders by discounting situational factors and focusing the victim's attention on the transgressor's behavior and motive (Fein, 2001; Gilbert, 1998; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones & Davis, 1965; Reeder, Vonk, Ronk, Ham, & Lawrence, 2004). Insofar as harsh dispositional inferences about offenders affect victims' expectations about offenders' future behavior, victims of such transgressions sometimes seek revenge or engage in avoidance strategies to retaliate or self-protect (Reeder, 1993; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). Thus, following an attribution of intent, forgiveness may be unlikely for victims of an interpersonal offense because harsh dispositional judgments and protective strategies that often accompany such events (i.e., retaliation, avoidance) are not conducive to forgiveness.

Fortunately, an apology from a transgressor has proven to be an effective interpersonal strategy for restoring damaged relationships (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Eaton & Struthers, 2006; Weiner et al., 1991). One explanation for why apologies influence forgiveness is that they improve the impression of the transgressor (Goffman, 1955; Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Schlenker, 1980; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Forster, & Montada, 2004). When offenders apologize for a transgression, they are explicitly communicating to the injured party information affirming their involvement, responsibility, remorse, understanding of the impact, how sorry they are, and that the offense was not due to the victim or the situation, but instead, due to the transgressor. In addition, by confessing, empathizing, and apologizing, the transgressor is also implicitly communicating to the victim that the transgressor is a person of worth (i.e., responsible, empathic, and a genuine person), thereby transforming the victim's negative impression of the offender to a more benevolent one (Gilbert, 1998; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980; Weiner, 1995, 2006). In turn, the victims are more forgiving of (i.e., less likely to retaliate against and avoid) transgressors because they have a better impression of them (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003; Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Schmitt et al., 2004).

Ironically however, the benefits of an apology may backfire when transgressors intended to harm the injured party. When saddled to purposefully harmful acts, transgressors who apologize may be perceived, suspiciously, as self-interested, untrustworthy, and as having an ulterior motive (Fein, 1996; Schul, Mayo, & Burnstein, 2004), rather than, normatively, as empathic, genuine, and trustworthy. In this case, apology might, paradoxically, limit the possibility of forgiveness even further because the victim fails to adjust his or her initial harsh impression of the transgressor to a more favorable one and instead adjusts to a pejorative one (Fein, 1996, 2001; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Reeder et al., 2004; Roese & Morris, 1999; Vonk, 1998).

Although the study of intent is becoming more popular in the social psychological literature (e.g., Gollwitzer, 1999; Kruger & Gilovich, 2004; Malle & Knobe, 1997; Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2004), research is needed to better understand how and why it interacts with apology to influence the forgiveness process. Thus, the purpose of the present research was twofold: (1) to

examine the moderating effect of attributions of intent on the apology → forgiveness process following an interpersonal offense, and (2) to test injured parties' impression of the transgressor as a potential mechanism to explain the potential ironic effects of intent and apology on forgiveness.

Overview of research

Two experiments and one nonexperimental study utilizing different methods (i.e., laboratory experiment, thought experiment, retrospective-naturalistic study), samples (i.e., university students, nonuniversity sample), and measures (e.g., questionnaire, behavioral intentions, actual behaviors) were conducted to test and systematically confirm two hypotheses. Based on the notion that an apology following a victim's attribution of high intent would backfire because it engenders a more negative impression of the transgressor, we tested the following hypotheses. In Studies 1–3, we predicted an interaction between attributions of intent and apology on forgiveness. More specifically, transgressions that arise from unintentional acts will generate greater forgiveness in victims when the transgressor apologizes rather than when the transgressor does not. However, we also predicted that an apology following an attribution of intent would lead to lower forgiveness compared to no apology. In Studies 2 and 3, we examined participants' impression of the transgressor as a potential mechanism to explain the effect of the interaction between attributions of intent and apology on forgiveness. Overall we predicted that the interaction would be mediated by the victim's impression of the transgressor.

Study 1

Method

Participants

The participants were 47 senior university students who, on average, were 22 years old. Participants received course credit and had their names entered into a draw for a \$50 prize in exchange for their participation.

Materials

Transgression stimulus. A confederate was employed to rig the transgression and to manipulate the intent and apology independent variables. The participant and the confederate (posing as another participant) were instructed to read a section from a psychology textbook and then to respond to a series of 10 questions regarding facts about the section. The transgression in all conditions involved the confederate erasing the answers to the 10 questions by hitting a computer joystick that he was instructed to not touch. In the no intent condition, the confederate unintentionally hit the joystick when he reached for his glasses case, whereas in the intent condition, the confederate purposefully hit the joystick. Following this manipulation, the confederate either apologized or did not.

Measures

Manipulation checks. Participants indicated whether they perceived their partner acting on purpose (1) or not (0) and whether he had apologized (1) or not (0).

Forgiveness. Participants were initially told that the purpose of the study was to examine how individuals interact in completing tasks. Given this, we believed that the use of a more formal and lengthy measure of forgiveness (e.g., the TRIM, McCullough et al., 1998) at the end of the study would have made the participants suspicious about the actual purpose of the study. Thus, on a 7-

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