



# The effect of apology on forgiveness: Belief in a just world as a moderator<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The current investigation proposed that an apology's curative effect for dealing with interpersonal transgressions depends on dispositional justice beliefs, namely the Belief in a Just World (BJW).

Study 1 ( $N = 116$ ) used scenarios describing an offense in close relationships, and revealed that an apology promoted forgiveness only among people with low BJW. This effect was mediated by level of affect. Study 2 ( $N = 195$ ) replicated the pattern using different scenarios, measure of avoidance, benevolence, and revenge, and controlling for the Big Five personality dimensions and interpersonal trust. The effect was mediated by perceived intent.

The findings support the role of BJW as a coping mechanism and underscore the importance of emotional reactions and perceived intention in the process of forgiveness.

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## 1. Introduction

Conflicts and misunderstandings are unavoidable. However, they can have an acute detrimental effect on close relationships, which provide people with support and a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Forgiveness is a process that allows for close relationships to endure despite hurtful events, defined by McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) as a “set of motivational changes whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to retaliate against an offending relationship partner, decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender, and increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender” (p. 321). The degree to which the offended party forgives varies according to situational factors, such as the offering of an apology or expression of remorse by the offending party (Darby & Shlenker, 1982), and to dispositional characteristics, such as neuroticism (Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005). Considering the aforementioned, the current study examined the joint effect of situational and dispositional characteristics on the degree of forgiveness in close

relationships following a transgression, as well as potentially mediating mechanisms.

### 1.1. Forgiveness and apology

The process of forgiveness involves resolution of an unpleasant emotion of anger within oneself and a change of attitude towards the offending party (Akhtar, 2002). Therefore, forgiveness can also be defined as an intra-individual pro-social change regarding a perceived transgressor in an interpersonal context (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Forgiveness takes on unique features in close relationships (McCullough et al., 1997), partly due to a feeling of commitment, which is defined as the intent to persist in a relationship and feelings of psychological attachment to the partner (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Forgiveness was associated with feelings of closeness and commitment, and people who are more forgiving reported greater satisfaction in their relationship (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Worthington & Drinkard, 2000). Moreover, the association between forgiving and enhanced psychological well-being was found to be more pronounced in relationships with a strong rather than a weak commitment (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991).

Since forgiveness can reconcile and restore relationships, it was proposed that it might be associated with mental and physical well-being

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by virtue of its utility in helping people maintain a set of stable and supportive interpersonal relationships (McCullough, 2000). McCullough et al. (1997, 1998) proposed that an offender in a close relationship demonstrates a higher willingness to apologize, compared to other types of relationships, which can lead to increased forgiveness. It is well established that the extent to which an offender apologizes, shows remorse or confesses, influences forgiveness (Darby & Shlenker, 1982; Davis & Gold, 2011; McCullough et al., 1997; McCullough et al., 1998; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). In fact, sincere apologies and expressions of remorse might be the most potent courses of action under the offender's control that can influence the likelihood of being forgiven (McCullough, 2000). An apology has been defined as an account, acknowledgement, and an attempted restitution offered to the offended partner for an error committed by the aggressor (Scobie & Scobie, 1998). It is also a social convention that serves as recognition that rules have been broken, and an acknowledgement of the existence of interpersonal obligations (Darby & Shlenker, 1982).

### 1.2. *The belief in a just world*

Forgiveness has been associated with several personality traits, such as self-esteem (Brown, 2003; Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006) and neuroticism (Brose et al., 2005). However, since a transgression signifies that rules have been broken and includes perceptions of injustice (Barclay, Skarlicki, & Pugh, 2005), a general personality dimension related to these issues might have a central role in the apology-forgiveness cycle (Tavuchis, 1991). In fact, the governmental entity in charge of resolving severe transgressions is termed the Justice System. Thus, a leading candidate for a personality characteristic that might influence the apology-forgiveness relationship is the Belief in a Just World (BJW), which postulates that good things tend to happen to good people and bad things to bad people (Furnham, 2003); i.e., good people are rewarded and bad people are punished (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). Although BJW is a fundamental illusion in human perception (Lerner, 1980), individual differences exist due to maturation and experience which modify the perspective of a morally-correct world that was presented in childhood (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). Lerner and Miller (1978) summarized the BJW theory by stating that human beings need to believe that they live in a world where people usually get what they deserve, since without such a belief it would be difficult to regulate everyday social behaviour and commit to long term goals. The BJW was linked to victim blaming and derogation (for reviews see Lerner & Miller, 1978; Furnham, 2003; Furnham & Procter, 1989), which was interpreted as its ability to provide a buffer against the harsh realities of the world and a sense of personal control over one's destiny (Furnham, 2003). The BJW's buffering capability enabled it to be viewed at times as a healthy coping mechanism, positively correlated with life satisfaction and negatively correlated with depressive affect (Correia & Dalbert, 2007; Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996; Otto, Boos, Dalbert, Schops, & Hoyer, 2006; Ritter, Benson, & Snyder, 1990).

### 1.3. *Research overview and hypotheses*

The variability in forgiveness, which can be partly explained by situational factors, could be better understood by including dispositions that may attenuate or intensify the effect of an offense as well as an apology. A combination of restoration attempts and their perceived necessity and impact, which can stem from just world beliefs, are expected to better predict willingness to forgive. Although justice beliefs can be a barrier to forgiveness, since they are incompatible with an arbitrary cancellation of debt (Exline & Baumeister, 2000), the activation of justice was found to promote forgiveness (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005) and forgiveness itself can help restore the victim's sense of justice (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2012). Thus, the relationship between justice and post-transgression motivations might be difficult to entangle. For example, while high BJW was associated with greater psychological distress

and desire for revenge after the events of September 11, 2001 (Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2004), priming justice was found to promote a general forgiveness tendency (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005). These studies differed in various aspects, such as relationship closeness, methodologies, and measurements utilized. While efforts have been made to measure a general forgiveness tendency (Berry, Worthington, Parrot, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; Thompson et al., 2005), important factors were not addressed, such as type of relationship (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003) and the existence of an apology (Darby & Shlenker, 1982). Thus, it is not surprising that different studies reported incompatible results regarding the association between BJW and forgiveness (Lucas, Young, Zhdanova, & Alexander, 2010; Strelan, 2007; Strelan & Sutton, 2011), which may all be valid depending on the exact circumstances of the situation explored. However, to the best of our knowledge, the combined effect of BJW and apology on forgiveness was never examined.

The current research draws on the conceptualization of the BJW as an effective coping mechanism and a buffer against anger and negative emotions (Dalbert, 2001, 2002; Lipkus et al., 1996; Ritter et al., 1990). Accommodation processes in couples, i.e. constructive rather than destructive responses to conflicts, were found to be associated with BJW (Lipkus & Bissonnette, 1996, 1998). This can indicate that people with high BJW perceive their partners as acting in a manner consistent with themes of deservingness, which implies a belief that the offense is to some extent justifiable as well as expectations that their own accommodation will be reciprocated in the long-term (Furnham, 2003). Therefore, if the BJW is an effective coping mechanism, then the emotional effect deriving from a transgression in close relationships (e.g., anger and hatred, Enright and The Human Development Study Group, 1991) should be less intense in people with high BJW compared to low BJW. In other words, apology increases forgiveness by reducing negative emotions, which are initially moderate when the BJW is endorsed since the transgression may appear less unjust to begin with and may be expected to even out in the long run. Moreover, if negative emotions are less extreme, then the positive transformation stemming from an apology should also be less extreme. Since forgiveness is grounded on emotional reactions (e.g., Takaku, 2001), there is no reason for it to depend on an apology if one is not emotionally distressed. Therefore, the central hypothesis of the current research was that while an apology will lead to increased forgiveness, this effect will be moderated by BJW in close relationships: people with a strong belief will be less affected by the existence or absence of an apology following a transgression, compared to people with weak BJW. In other words, people with high BJW exhibit more accommodation processes in close relationships, reflected in the ability to move forward with the relationship regardless of remorse or compensation, since events are interpreted in a global context of fairness (e.g., immanent or ultimate justice). Thus, the presence or absence of an apology would matter more for people with low compared to high BJW, since their world is not automatically balanced by fairness beliefs, necessitating offerings of other commodities (e.g., an apology) in order for the relationship to re-stabilize. Therefore, the purpose of Study 1 was to test the hypothesized moderation effect and whether it is reflected in people's emotional reactions and mediated by them. Study 2 aimed to replicate the results, expand them to include different outcomes, control for alternative explanations, and explore possible mechanisms by which the moderation effect could transpire.

## 2. Study 1

This study tested the hypothesis that while an apology leads to an increased level of forgiveness, the effect would be moderated by the BJW: people with low BJW would forgive more when an apology is present, while people with high BJW would display a similar level of forgiveness regardless of the existence or absence of an apology. The method consisted of fictional scenarios regarding a transgression committed by a partner and a close friend. In addition, in line with the basic reasoning of the hypothesis, affect was expected to demonstrate the same pattern as forgiveness and mediate the hypothesized interaction.

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