



## Guilt, empathy, and apology

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### ABSTRACT

Two studies examined correlates of apology predicted by the theoretical conceptualizations of Tangney and colleagues (e.g., Tangney, 1995) and Sandage, Worthington, Hight, and Berry (2000) concerning guilt and empathy in people's responses to interpersonal transgressions. In Study 1, 90 undergraduates completed measures of guilt, shame, and apology. As predicted, greater guilt (but not greater shame) was associated with greater generalized willingness to apologize, greater endorsement of the importance of apology in relation to a hypothetical transgression scenario, and greater inclusion of important elements of an apology in a written response to the scenario. In Study 2, with 338 undergraduates, greater guilt, lesser shame, and greater empathy were associated with a greater generalized willingness to apologize. Results are considered in relation to viewing apology as an adaptive capacity.

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### 1. Introduction

While apology often precedes forgiveness, forgiveness has thus far received the lion's share of attention by psychologists (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Lazare, 2004). Theoretical frameworks for apology are, as a result, less fully developed than those for forgiveness, although treatises have identified psychological capacities underlying apologies. For example, Tavuchis (1991) argued that, to constitute a sincere apology, "the offender has to be sorry, and has to say so" (p. 36), suggesting that a capacity for guilt or remorse, firstly, and for consideration toward others, secondly, are of central importance in apology.

A rich and empirically substantiated theoretical framework applicable to apology is that of Tangney and colleagues (e.g., Tangney, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tangney, Youman, & Stuewig, 2009) concerning correlates and consequences of guilt and shame. These theorists argue that guilt is experienced when a *specific behavior* is negatively evaluated by the transgressor, whereas shame is experienced when the *entire self* is negatively evaluated following a wrongdoing. Guilt associated with negatively reflecting upon one's undesirable *behavior* gives rise to a consideration of the impact of the behavior on others, triggering feelings of empathy and various forms of reparative action. Shame associated with negatively reflecting upon the undesirable *self* gives rise to excessive concerns with how one is viewed by others, encouraging externalization of blame and avoidance behavior.

Importantly, Tangney and colleagues (e.g., Tangney, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tangney et al., 2009) identify apology as one form of reparation that is fostered by feelings of guilt, but not by feelings of shame. Because apology is an approach-oriented and other-oriented response to a particular transgression incident that may mitigate the consequences of the transgression, it is the type of behavioral response that is fostered by guilt. Apology is not hypothesized to be promoted by feelings of shame, as shame orients the transgressor inward. Therefore, it is theorized that guilt and empathic concerns foster apology, whereas shame and self-oriented concerns do not.

No research has directly examined apology in relation to guilt, shame, and empathy; however, some studies supportive of distinctions between guilt and shame are relevant to apology. Covert, Tangney, Maddux, and Heleno (2003) showed that higher guilt and lower shame were associated with higher solution quality in response to hypothetical interpersonal dilemmas. Leith and Baumeister (1998) showed that guilt-proneness fostered greater perspective-taking when imagining a past interpersonal conflict, which in turn promoted steps toward a positive relationship outcome.

An additional theoretical framework also implicates guilt and empathy in apology. Sandage, Worthington, Hight, and Berry (2000) conceptualize the *seeking of forgiveness* as involving apology (and other acts of reparation) accompanied by empathy toward the offended party and emotions of guilt and sorrow. In support of this view, positive correlates of the seeking of forgiveness include guilt and regret (Bassett, Bassett, Lloyd, & Johnson, 2006; Riek, 2010) and relationship closeness (Ashy, Mercurio, & Malley-Morrison, 2010; Riek, 2010), whereas negative correlates include narcissism and self-focused attention (Sandage et al., 2000).

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### 1.1. The current research

In Study 1, we measured individual differences in guilt-proneness, shame-proneness, and apology propensity. We predicted that guilt (but not shame) would positively correlate with scores on a measure of the disposition to apologize, the Proclivity to Apologize Measure (PAM; Howell, Dopko, Turowski, & Buro, 2011). In addition, written responses to a hypothetical transgression scenario were coded for elements of an apology, based on prior research and theory which identified key elements as including *expression of sorrow/regret, taking responsibility for the wrongdoing, providing reparation, and committing to behavioral reform* (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Fraser, 1981; Holesman, 2008; Lazare, 2004; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schlenker & Darby, 1981). We predicted that guilt scores (but not shame scores) would correlate positively with the number of elements included in the response to the scenario and with ratings of the importance of apologizing in the hypothetical situation.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

Study 1 involved a sample of 90 (85.6% female; mean age 21.8) introductory psychology students at a Canadian university. First- and second-year students comprised 79% and 17% of participants, respectively. Eighty percent of participants were born in Canada.

#### 2.1.2. Procedure

Consenting participants completed a package of questionnaires in return for partial course credit. The package instructed participants to carefully read the following scenario:

“You are approaching the end of the semester in university, when all written assignments and exams are weighing heavily on you. The demands and expectations of school feel unmanageable and require most of your time. A friend of yours has made many attempts to spend time with you, but you haven’t been able to see him or her. . . One day you are in a particularly foul mood, after not doing so well on an assignment, and your friend calls to whine about the music that was playing at the bar last night. This pushes you over the edge and you yell at your friend. You call your friend a loser and tell him or her to leave you alone because you are sick of the constant whining. You manage to sprinkle your statements with a few swear words, and other insults, and then you hang up. In the heat of your rage you login to Facebook and delete his or her friendship”.

The next page asked participants to consider the following: “A couple of weeks later, school is finished and life settles down. One day, you look down at your cell phone and the caller display shows that this same friend is calling. In the space below, write what you would do and/or say to the person at this moment”. Twelve blank lines were provided for participants’ responses.

Next, participants completed an apology endorsement measure in relation to the scenario, the Test of Self-Conscious Affect-3, the Proclivity to Apologize Measure (all described below), as well as demographic questions (i.e., enquiring about age, sex, year of study, and country of birth).

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Apology elements

As previously discussed, four elements have been identified as central to an apology: expression of regret, taking responsibility,

reparation, and reform. Participants’ responses to the transgression scenario were coded for the presence or absence of each element. Responses from 45 participants (i.e., 50% of the sample) were coded by a second, independent rater. Inter-rater reliability was high for expression of regret ( $\kappa = 1.00$ ), responsibility ( $\kappa = 0.83$ ), reparation ( $\kappa = 0.86$ ), and reform ( $\kappa = 0.66$ ). For each participant, we summed the number of elements (out of the total possible of four).

#### 2.2.2. Apology endorsement

Participants rated five statements on 6-point scales labeled 1 (*strongly agree*) to 6 (*strongly disagree*) to measure their endorsement of apology in relation to the scenario. Questions consisted of statements such as “It would be important to apologize in this situation” and “My friend would feel better if I were to apologize in this situation.” Responses to items were reverse-scored and summed, such that high scores indicated greater endorsement of apology.

#### 2.2.3. Proclivity to Apologize Measure (PAM; Howell et al., 2011)

The PAM is composed of eight items (e.g., “I don’t like to apologize because it lets the other person feel superior to me”) rated on 7-point scales with endpoints 1 (*strong disagreement*) and 7 (*strong agreement*). Responses are reverse-coded and summed so that higher scores reflect higher apology propensity. Howell et al. provided evidence of acceptable internal consistency of the PAM ( $\alpha$  ranged between 0.80 and 0.85 across four studies) and evidence of construct validity (e.g., inverse correlations with narcissism and entitlement).

#### 2.2.4. Test of Self-Conscious Affect-3 (TOSCA-3; Tangney, Dearing, Wagner, & Gramzow, 2000)

As recommended by Tangney et al. (2000), we employed an 11-item version of the TOSCA-3 which contains only negative scenarios (e.g., “You break something at work and then hide it”). Each scenario is followed by four possible reactions, reflecting features associated with guilt, shame, externalization, and detachment (in a random order). Respondents rate the likelihood of each of the four reactions in relation to each situation on a 5-point scale, with endpoints labeled 1 (*not likely*) and 5 (*very likely*). Each subscale score is the sum of responses to the relevant scale. The scales have evidenced good internal consistencies (shame,  $\alpha = 0.88$ ; guilt,  $\alpha = 0.83$ ; externalization,  $\alpha = 0.80$ ; detachment,  $\alpha = 0.77$ ) and test–retest reliabilities for shame and guilt were 0.85 and 0.74, respectively (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

## 3. Results

Descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1. The lower alpha coefficients for TOSCA-3 subscales are not

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics for variables in Study 1.

Variable	M	SD	Observed range	Possible range	$\alpha$
1. Proclivity to apologize	43.52	8.21	19.00–56.00	8.00–56.00	.79
2. Apology endorsement	27.21	3.66	5.00–30.00	5.00–30.00	.86
3. Elements of apology	2.14	0.86	0.00–4.00	0.00–4.00	–
4. Guilt	45.94	4.77	30.00–53.00	11.00–55.00	.60
5. Shame	33.02	6.72	18.00–52.00	11.00–55.00	.71
6. Externalization	23.79	5.94	12.00–36.00	11.00–55.00	.66
7. Detachment	30.78	4.63	19.00–47.00	11.00–55.00	.42

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