



An examination of emotional empathy, attributions of stability, and the link between perceived remorse and forgiveness

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ABSTRACT

Sincere apologies can motivate forgiveness; however, there are differing theoretical perspectives on the mechanism by which this occurs. The empathy model of forgiveness suggests empathy mediates the link between apologies and forgiveness. Alternatively, attribution theory suggests that the apology–forgiveness link is best explained by attributions of behavioral stability. The empathy and attribution models both receive considerable empirical support; however, they remain relatively independent within the literature and the relationship between these mechanisms is thus far unexamined. Within interpersonal romantic relationships, we test a model of apologies and forgiveness that focuses on perceived remorse and integrates these two theoretical perspectives. We test the primary hypothesis that perceived remorse influences attributions of behavioral stability, which in turn influences forgiveness both directly and indirectly via empathy. Results from a path analysis suggest increases in perceived remorse decreased attributions of behavioral stability and increased empathy and forgiveness. Attributions of stability mediated the effect of remorse on empathy, and empathy mediated the effect of attributions of stability on forgiveness. These data establish a relationship between attributions of stability and emotional empathy perspectives and suggest an integrated model of apologies, remorse and forgiveness.

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1. Introduction

Apologies broadly function to maintain interpersonal, romantic and inter-group relations by providing a mechanism for rectifying the nearly inevitable social transgression (Goffman, 1967; Tavuchis, 1991). For the injured party, forgiving a transgression typically involves letting go of negative affect and motivations toward revenge or retaliation, despite an entitlement to such feelings (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992). Those who offer an apology tend to receive more forgiveness than those who do not apologize (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003), especially when an apology is accompanied by expressions of remorse (Bornstein, Lahana, & Miller, 2002; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Förster, & Montada, 2004). When social transgressions occur within romantic dyads, victims may be more likely to seek retaliation and engage in behavior detrimental to the relationship (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Forgiveness is an ideal outcome for a transgressor who wishes to repair the damaged romantic relationship (see: Gunderson & Ferrari, 2008; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2009).

Evidence supports a causal link between giving an apology and eliciting forgiveness across relationships (see Hodgins &

Liebeskind, 2003; McCullough et al., 1997; Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004); however, there are two different theoretical mechanisms suggested for this effect. One line of research (the empathy model; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; McCullough et al., 1997) proposes that an apology causes a motivation to forgive by promoting victims' empathetic concern for the offender. A parallel perspective suggests an apology facilitates the perception that the offending behavior is unlikely to occur again, causing decreases in attributions of behavioral stability and thus motivating forgiveness (the attribution model; Gold & Davis, 2005; Gold & Weiner, 2000; Takaku, 2001; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). Independently, these explanations receive considerable experimental support; however, the nature of the relationship *between* these mechanisms remains unexamined. Our research integrates these two perspectives by testing predictions regarding the relationship between empathetic concern and attributions of stability as co-mediators of the link between perceived remorse and forgiveness.

1.1. An attribution model of apologies and forgiveness

Attribution theory suggests that an apology may function as a tool for impression management by altering the victims' perceptions of the transgressor (Weiner et al., 1991). An apology given by a transgressor can function to influence the victims'

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attributions of causality for the offense along the dimensions of responsibility and stability (see Weiner, 1986). In the absence of an account or apology from the transgressor, a victim is likely to make internal stable attributions for the cause of the offense (Riordan, Marlin, & Kellogg, 1983). The perpetrator may offer an account with the purpose of minimizing attributions of responsibility (e.g., *It's not my fault*; Jehle, Miller, & Kimmelmeier, 2009); they may offer an apology with the purpose of minimizing attributions of stability, (e.g., *I won't do this again*; Gold & Weiner, 2000) or some combination of the two. Regardless, an apology functions to reduce dispositional attributions for the cause of the offense (Gold & Davis, 2005). When an account includes both an apology and an acceptance of responsibility, the transgressor conveys that they value the violated social rule, norm, or contract (Weiner, 1986). This leads the victim to conclude that the transgressor will likely adhere to the social rules and norms in the future, and thus the bad or unacceptable behavior cannot be reflective of their disposition (Gold & Davis, 2005). Decreased attributions of behavioral stability are associated with increased motivation to maintain positive relations with a transgressor (e.g., Hall & Fincham, 2006) and demonstrably cause increases in forgiveness (Gold & Weiner, 2000).

1.2. An empathy model of apologies and forgiveness

Emotional empathy has been the focus of a great deal of research on forgiveness following transgressions in the context of interpersonal and romantic relations (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998; Paleari et al., 2009). The empathy model of forgiveness suggests that emotional empathy is a primary mechanism for motivating forgiveness following an apology (McCullough et al., 1997). A victim's experience of empathy leads them to care more for the transgressor and the affected relationship, making them more likely to forgive (McCullough et al., 1998). Empathy is strongly related to forgiveness (Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002) and is associated with reduced motivations toward relationship destructive behaviors like rumination, avoidance and revenge (McCullough et al., 1998). Importantly, empathy mediates the relationship between apologies and forgiveness (Brown, Wohl, & Exline, 2008; McCullough et al., 1997, Study 3).

1.3. Apologies and perceived remorse

Perceived remorse is an important feature of an apology (Gold & Weiner, 2000). Remorse is characterized by negative feelings regarding the consequences of one's behavior (Brooks & Reddon, 2003). The greater the perceived remorse, the more effective the apology is in reducing negative consequences like blame and punishment (Darby & Schlenker, 1982) and facilitating the cognitive and behavioral changes associated with forgiveness (Bornstein et al., 2002). For example, those who are convicted of a crime but apologize and are remorseful typically receive relatively lighter sentencing than those who are not remorseful (Proeve & Howells, 2006).

1.4. Remorse and the empathy model

Given that empathy mediates the causal relationship between apologies and forgiveness (Brown et al., 2008; McCullough et al., 1997, Study 3), and that remorse is an important affective component of an apology (Gold & Weiner, 2000), it is reasonable to expect that a victim's empathy mediates the relationship between perceived remorse and forgiveness. Perhaps remorse signals that the offender is suffering psychologically because of their hurtful behavior and this leads the victim to empathize with and ultimately forgive the transgressor. However, past research has

not examined the empathy model of forgiveness in terms of the remorse perceived in an apology.

1.5. Remorse and the attribution model

Increases in perceived remorse cause decreases in attributions of behavioral stability and increases in forgiveness (Gold & Weiner, 2000). A remorseful apology may lead the victim to perceive that the transgressor is unlikely to engage in the aberrant behavior in the future, and this may increase their motivation to forgive. Additionally, as McCullough et al. (1997) imply in their discussion, it may be the case that unstable attributions increase victims' empathy for the transgressor; however, this implication has not been examined. To integrate these theoretical perspectives we examine the relationship between emotional empathy and attributions of stability, and their combined effect in motivating forgiveness.

1.6. Summary

The empathy model posits that the apology–forgiveness link is best understood by the victims' experience of empathy for the transgressor. An apology facilitates victims' experience of empathy, and this causes an increase in the likelihood of victims choosing to forgive. The attribution of stability model suggests that an apology influences judgments about the transgressor's future behavior. Apologies can result in unstable behavioral attributions that suggest the aberrant behavior as unlikely to occur again; this in turn causes increases in victims' forgiveness. Increases in the level of remorse perceived in an apology decrease attributions of stability and increase both empathy and forgiveness. Evidence reviewed thus far supports both empathy and stability attributions as mediators of the apology–forgiveness link; however, the relationship between these mediators is unknown.

1.7. Attributions of stability and emotional empathy

We conjecture that when a victim is considering an apology given by a transgressor, attribution processes occur proximally earlier than the victim's experience of emotional empathy. Following a remorseful apology, we expect that judging a transgressor's behavior to be unstable (decreased attributions of stability) should increase people's empathetic concern for the transgressor (Hypothesis 1). It seems likely that people will feel more sympathetic and desire to maintain a relationship with a transgressor that they perceive will not harm them again. Conjointly, behaviorally stable attributions should decrease an empathetic response. After all, why should a victim desire to continue a relationship with someone perceived as likely to behave in a similar hurtful way in the future? We predict that emotional empathy should mediate the relationship between attributions of stability and forgiveness (Hypothesis 2) and that attributions of stability and emotional empathy will completely mediate the effect of remorse on forgiveness (Hypothesis 3). To test these hypotheses, we examine the

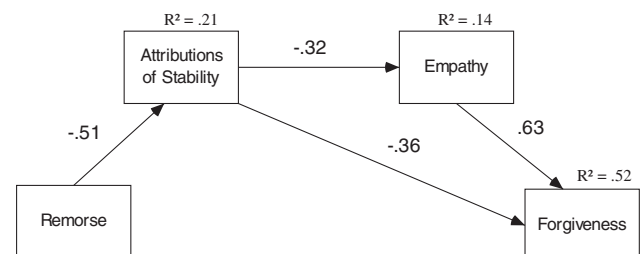


Fig. 1. Path analysis testing the hypothesized model.

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