BUT I SAID I WAS SORRY! ON THE IMPORTANCE OF MATCHING APOLOGIES TO VICTIM SELF-CONSTRUALS

RYAN FEHR
Department of Psychology
University of Maryland, College Park
College Park, MD 20742

MICHELE J. GELFAND
University of Maryland, College Park

ABSTRACT

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) doesn’t. 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. Hierarchical linear modeling analysis from a policy capturing experiment supports the primary hypotheses. As predicted, victims who emphasize the independent, relational, and collective selves were most likely to forgive following apologies that contained offers of compensation, expressions of empathy, and acknowledgements of violated rules/norms, respectively.

INTRODUCTION

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). Indeed, the value and importance of apology is difficult to refute. 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, 2008; Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004; Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid, & Elving, 2006). Nonetheless, scholars and laypeople alike have recognized the potential for apologies to fail, drawing attention to the question, “Why is it that some apologies succeed whereas others fall on deaf ears?” (Kellogg, 2007; Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004). Central to this question of what makes an apology successful 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.

In examining the psychology of apology components, the current study 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, Yamaguchi, Kim, Choi, Gelfand, & Yuki, 1995). In considering how self-construal is likely to relate to apology components and victim forgiveness, it is proposed that forgiveness will be enhanced when offenders’ apologies are consistent with victims’ self-views. Specifically, it is hypothesized that victims emphasizing the independent, relational, and collective self-construals will be most likely to forgive their offenders following offers of compensation, expressions of empathy, and acknowledgements of violated rules/norms respectively.

Apology Components

Apology components have received only scattered empirical consideration within psychology (e.g. Schlenker & Darby, 1981; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Forster, & Montada, 2004). However, they have received much more attention from a number other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences (Cunningham, 2004; Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; James, 2006; Scher & Darley, 1997; Tavuchis, 1991; Tomlinson et al, 2004). Across such fields as law, sociology, and psychiatry, scholars have focused on three apology components that are particularly relevant to the current study: offers of compensation, expressions of empathy, and acknowledgements of a violated rule/norm.

Apologies as offers of compensation are focused on the rational restoration of equity through exchange. That is, they are focused on offering to correct 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. 270) 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). The importance of offers of compensation can be summed up by Bishop Desmund 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).

While offers of compensation focus on rationality, equity, and exchange, expressions of empathy focus on relational issues. They demonstrate offenders’ concern for their victims’ suffering and indicate an interest in their feelings and emotions. 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 (Tavuchis, 1991; Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986). 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 settlement be stalled pending a direct apology. The Bishop empathically expressed "with very profound and deep compassion" an expression of empathy for the “immense suffering” that he had caused, after which the plaintiffs dropped their monetary request (Blaney and Dooley, 1998, p. 15).

Whereas offers of compensation and expressions of empathy are focused on the victim-offender dyad, acknowledgements of violated rules/norms expand the scope of an apology to the group context. In essence, this component involves a recognition that interpersonal behavior is bound by rules and norms, either implicit or explicit, that must be followed. Thus, acknowledgements of violated rules/norms may be particularly important within organizational and group contexts wherein strong behavioral norms are prevalent. On a broader level, acknowledgements of violated rules/norms can also reference peoples’ duties as members of an entire society or culture. According to Wagatsuma and Rosett (1986), “The act of apologizing
can be significant for its own sake as an acknowledgement of the authority of the hierarchical structure upon which social harmony is based” (p. 473).

**Apology Through the Lens of the Self**

Given the inherent value of each of the above mentioned apology components, it stands to reason that each component will exhibit a positive effect on forgiveness. Moreover, we argue that people can differ in their reactions to otherwise identical stimuli, such as apologies that include the same components. Thus, apologies might also exhibit contingent effects, influenced by victim individual differences. One individual difference that is likely to affect victims’ reactions to specific apology components is self-construal.

**The Independent Self-Construal and Offers of Compensation**

Victims who possess independent self-construals view themselves as unique and autonomous entities who are “separated from others” (Cross & Madson, 1997, p. 7). They are highly concerned with their personal rights and entitlements, generally pursue self-relevant goals, and view their relationships as exchange-oriented (Bresnahan, Chiu, & Levine, 2004). As a consequence of their beliefs and attitudes about the self, individuals with strong independent self-construals are likely to focus on issues related to their autonomy, individuality, and entitlements following an offense. More than other apology components, offers of compensation are closely aligned with these concerns, and should therefore be particularly effective. They establish the legitimacy of the victim’s claims and, in doing so, allow the victim to feel that he or she has “won” the moral competition between them, providing information that is congruent with the victim’s conceptualization of interpersonal relationships as competition-based (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

\[ H1: \text{Offers of compensation are most strongly related to forgiveness among victims with highly independent self-construals} \]

**The Relational Self-Construal and Expressions of Empathy**

In contrast to the independent self-construal, victims with highly relational self-construals conceptualize themselves as fundamentally connected to other people (Cross & Madson, 1997). They do not view themselves as separate from others, but rather as linked to and defined by their relationships. In both perception and action, highly relational people focus on the quality of their relationships and direct their actions toward maintaining and developing such relationships (Gelfand et al, 2006). More than offers of compensation or acknowledgements of violated rules/norms, expressions of empathy should be particularly efficacious for the relational self. Such expressions are highly relational, insomuch as they address the emotional state of the victim and imply empathy for the victim. They suggest feelings of closeness, interdependence, and interpersonal relatedness, all of which are important when the relational self-construal is strong (Cross & Madson, 1997).

\[ H2: \text{Expressions of empathy are most strongly related to forgiveness among victims with highly relational self-construals} \]
The Collective Self-Construal and Acknowledgments of Violated Rules/Norms

Whereas the relational self focuses on close, personalized, and generally dyadic relationships, the collective self is focused on a broader, more impersonal identification with groups and social categories (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). When the collective self-construal is dominant the salience of one’s group identity is enhanced, shifting the conceptualization of the self from “I” to “we” (Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002). For the collective self, acknowledgements of violated rules/norms should be vital. Above and beyond offers of compensation or expressions of empathy, acknowledgements of violated rules/norms shift the focus of an apology from the victim-offender dyad to acknowledge the broader social context in which the violation is embedded. Acknowledgements of violated rules/norms demonstrate an understanding of the importance of the norms that define victims’ groups and the legitimacy of the group’s expectations.

H3: Acknowledgements of violated rules/norms are most strongly related to forgiveness among victims with highly collective self-construals

METHOD

In this study we utilized a policy capturing methodology - an application of Brunswik’s approach to studying human decision making that uses statistics to quantitatively describe “the relations between someone’s judgment and the information...used to make that judgment” (Stewart, 1988, p. 41). In a typical policy capturing study, the experimenter presents participants with a series of profiles that manipulates a focal set of variables and measures the impact of these manipulations on an outcome of interest. The current study applied this methodology by manipulating apology components across a series of conflict scenarios, and measuring the impact of the apology components on participants’ forgiveness ratings.

Participants and Procedure

171 undergraduate students from a large Mid-Atlantic University participated in the primary study in exchange for course credit (75.4% women, 24.6% men). The study was conducted across two sessions, with participants filling out the self-construal measure in session one and the policy capturing experiment in session two. Participants’ average age was 20.2. The two sessions were completed an average of 15 days apart. The distance between sessions exhibited no associations with any of the study’s variables, nor any interactions with the study’s primary findings.

Policy Capturing Design

Upon entering the lab, participants first read some background information regarding their relationship with a friend. The primary purposes of the background information were to a) establish the participant’s relationship with the friend, and b) detail the context of the situation in which the conflict occurred.

After reading the background information the participants read ten conflict scenarios that manipulated the apologies that were given following the conflict. The conflict event was based upon Gonzales, Manning, and Haugen’s (1992) “disk” conflict scenario, as published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, wherein the offender uses a disk that causes the
victim’s computer to crash. All three apology components were fully crossed in a full factorial design, allowing for the examination of the independent effects of each component. Two repeat scenarios were also included to allow for reliability analysis.

Measures

Forgiveness. Forgiveness was measured using two items adapted from the 19 Item Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale, selected on the basis of brevity and face validity (TRIM-19; McCullough et al., 1998). The first item was “Given this situation, I would forgive Pat.” The second item was “Given this situation, I would trust Pat in the future”. The items were combined to form an overall measure of forgiveness, $\alpha = .84$.

Self-Construal. Self-construal was measured with the LSCS (Selenta & Lord, 2005). Alphas for the independent, relational, and collective self-construals in this study were .79, .71, and .62, respectively, consistent with previous research (Johnson et al, 2006; Johnson & Chang, 2006).

Manipulation check for apology components. Following previous policy capturing research (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002), each apology component was rated for its distributional equivalence to ensure that the components tapped into their underlying constructs with equal strength, but did not overlap with the other components’ constructs (1=Not At All, 7=Completely). Each component was rated similarly in terms of its strength (Compensation, M=6.17; Empathy, M=6.19; Rule/Norm, M=6.30). A series of paired samples t-tests confirmed that each manipulation tapped into its intended construct more than the other components’ constructs.

RESULTS

The reliability of participants’ forgiveness ratings was assessed via the two repeat profile pairs, which yielded reliability coefficients of .91 and .92, respectively. To assess the interactive effects of self-construal and apologies on forgiveness, we developed a slopes-as-outcomes approach. In slopes-as-outcomes models, a Level 2 variable is hypothesized to moderate the effects of a set of Level 1 variables on a given outcome of interest. In our case, the independent, relational, and collective self-construals at Level 2 were hypothesized to moderate the effects of the three apology components on forgiveness at Level 1. Three separate models were built and tested. In each model, forgiveness was regressed on all three apology components at Level 1, with gender (as a control) and one of the three self-construals entered at Level 2.

Support was found for each primary hypothesis. In model 1, victim independent self-construal significantly predicted the effect of offenders’ offers of compensation on victim forgiveness $\gamma = .15, t(168) = 2.02, p<.05$. In model 2, victim relational self-construal predicted the impact of offenders’ expressions of empathy on victim forgiveness, $\gamma = .20, t(168) = 2.18, p<.05$. Finally, in model 3, the collective self-construal predicted the effect of offenders’ acknowledgements of violated rules/norms on victim forgiveness, $\gamma = .18, t(168) = 2.10, p<.05$. No anomalous effects were found, with the exception of the relationship between the relational self-construal and acknowledgement of a violated rule/norm, which was significant $p<.05$. 
DISCUSSION

Despite the many potential benefits of apologies, it is clear that people are not always satisfied with the specific apology content they receive. For instance, while some Muslims accepted Pope Benedict’s apology for his critical comments of their faith in 2006, others denounced it for not constituting a “full apology” (Cooperman, 2006). In China, Mattel executives received widespread criticism for their apology following the recall of toys deemed dangerous for their lead content (“Plenty of Blame”, 2007). Inherent in these discussions of the content of apologies is a recognition that the simple act of apology itself is not enough to inspire forgiveness. To truly arouse forgiveness, apologies must also include the specific components that the victim needs to hear. Despite the inherent importance of apology components, psychologists and management scholars alike have remained limited in their conceptualization of apologies as largely dichotomous (e.g. Brown et al, 2008; Liao, 2008; Ohbuchi et al, 1989). In this paper, we sought to move beyond the question of if an apology has been offered to ask “Which components of apologies are most strongly related to forgiveness, and for whom?”

Consistent with our theory, each self-construal strengthened the relationship between the hypothesized apology component and forgiveness. Our results align with a long history of research showing that people prefer information that is consistent with and verifies their own self-views (e.g. Swann, 1987). Just as people prefer information that confirms their levels of self-esteem or confidence, so too do victims of offenses prefer apologies that are consistent with their self-construals.

Across people, cultures, and time, conflict is ubiquitous, making effective avenues for conflict resolution especially vital. However, anecdotal evidence on the potential dangers of apology highlights the importance of examining exactly when apologies are most likely to be effective. By integrating theories of self-construal and apology, the current study has shown how the tailoring of apologies to individuals’ self-construals can result in increased victim forgiveness. It is our hope that this study will encourage a continued exploration of the dynamics of apologies, and their implications for interpersonal conflict resolution.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS