Original Article

Relationship value promotes costly apology-making: testing the valuable relationships hypothesis from the perpetrator's perspective

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The valuable relationships hypothesis posits that people are inclined to reconcile with their valuable-relationship partners. Focusing on a particular type of credible conciliatory signal (i.e., costly apology), the present study tested this hypothesis from the perpetrator's perspective. In studies 1 and 2, after imagining that they had committed an interpersonal transgression against one of their real friends, participants ($N = 529$ and 311 in studies 1 and 2, respectively) rated their willingness to incur a cost in order to apologize to the victim. Apology cost was operationalized as "canceling plans to make an apology as soon as possible" in study 1, and as "offering compensation" in study 2. The results showed that the instrumentality of the partner to achieving the participants' goals would increase their willingness to make a costly apology, after controlling for the participants' sex, version of the transgression scenario, closeness to the victim, and expected forgiveness of the victim. To ensure the external validity of this finding, studies 3 and 4 asked participants to recall one of their interpersonal transgression experiences, and to report whether they had offered compensation for it ($N = 190$ and 224 in studies 3 and 4, respectively). Study 3 confirmed the hypothesis, while study 4 did not directly support it. However, study 4 did show that participants were more willing to reconcile with their valuable partners. Taken together, these results indicate that the valuable relationships hypothesis applies not only to victims, but also to their perpetrators as well.

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1. Introduction

Occasional interpersonal conflicts are inevitable even between intimate partners. Fortunately, many such conflicts are peacefully resolved. Having observed conflict resolution among primates, de Waal (2000) proposed the valuable relationships hypothesis that posits that primates are inclined to reconcile with their valuable partners. Most of the evidence for this hypothesis was based on the systematic observations of the post-conflict approach tendency of individuals involved in a conflict (see de Waal & Pokorny, 2005, for a review). After sporadic conflicts, valuable partners tend to reconcile with each other more quickly than less valuable ones. The valuable relationships hypothesis was recently extended to human beings (McCullough, 2008), and has received empirical support (Burnette, McCullough, Van Tongeren, & Davis, 2012; McCullough, Luna, Berry, Tabak, & Bono, 2010; Verbeek & de Waal, 2001). However, most of the evidence for humans has been centered on forgiveness: victims are more prone to forgive their perpetrator when the perpetrator is a valuable partner (see McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2013, for a review). The present study approaches the valuable relationships hypothesis from the perpetrator's perspective and tests whether those who value the relationship with their victim are more likely to deploy effective reconciliation tactics, such as costly apology-making (Ohtsubo & Watanabe, 2009).

1.1. Relationship value, exploitation risk, and costly apology

Testing the valuable relationships hypothesis from the victim's perspective, Burnette et al. (2012) found that victims tended to forgive perpetrators who were not only valuable (high relationship value) but also unlikely to harm them again (low exploitation risk). This decision rule is adaptive because, no matter how (potentially) valuable the partner is, the forgiver cannot reap benefits from preserving a relationship with an exploitative partner (McCullough et al., 2013). It is noteworthy that this decision rule requires the forgiver to read the perpetrator's intention accurately. As accurate intention-reading is facilitated by signals, Burnette et al.'s (2012) finding is also consistent with another evolutionary hypothesis regarding reconciliation, the benign intent signal hypothesis that posits that the primary function of reconciliatory tactics is to signal benign intent to resume a friendly interaction with a former opponent (Silk, 2002).

Perhaps the most common form of such reconciliatory signals among humans is an apology. Research has shown that apologies are generally effective in inducing forgiveness from the recipient (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; see also Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010, for a meta-analytic review). However, if they are perceived as insincere, apologies can add fuel to the fire (Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004; Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004). Sincerity matters because an apology can be "cheap talk" (Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002); in other words, if forgiveness can be earned by simply saying, "I am sorry," not only benign perpetrators but also exploitative

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perpetrators would adopt this approach. Although recent research (Leunissen, De Cremer, Reinders Folmer, & van Dijke, 2013) has shown that many apologies are offered out of sincere intention, it does not preclude the possibility that there are some perfunctory apologies. Therefore, people need to be cautious when assessing the credibility of their perpetrator's apology.

Drawing on costly signaling theory (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005; Henrich, 2009; Zahavi & Zahavi, 1997), Ohtsubo and Watanabe (2009) maintained that apologies are credible if truly remorseful perpetrators deliver them in a costly fashion. The common form of such costly reparative acts is compensation, which is known to be effective in inducing the victim's forgiveness (e.g., De Cremer, 2010; Desmet, De Cremer, & van Dijk, 2010, 2011; Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006). If the cost of compensation is sufficiently great, it will nullify the benefits of exploitation. Accordingly, those who only pursue the benefits of exploitation would not make such costly apologies (see Exline, Deshea, & Holeman, 2007, for a supportive result). Therefore, the costly signaling model ascribes the effectiveness of compensation to its ability to communicate the perpetrator's benign intent. However, there is an alternative explanation: compensation is effective because it allows the victim to recoup his/her losses, and equity is restored (Darley & Pittman, 2003). Nonetheless, Ohtsubo and Watanabe (2009, Studies 2 and 3) showed that apology cost that was unilaterally incurred by the perpetrator and would not be transferred to the victim (e.g., the perpetrator cancelling an important meeting) was also effective (see Ohtsubo et al., 2012, for replications in seven countries). Thus, without taking their signaling function into account, the effectiveness of costly forms of reparative acts cannot be fully understood.

1.2. Hypothesis and covariates

It is noteworthy that the costly apology model shares a core assumption with the valuable relationships hypothesis. The model assumes that only the perpetrators who highly value their relationship with the victim are motivated to incur the cost of apologizing. Therefore, it is predicted that relationship value also fosters the perpetrator's motivation to reconcile with his/her victim by making a costly apology. Although previous research revealed that recipients use the costliness of the apology to determine the sincerity of the apologizer (i.e., exploitation risk), it did not test this prediction. Accordingly, the present study tested the following hypothesis: Relationship value will promote the perpetrator's willingness to make a costly apology.

In order to examine the effect of relationship value, the present study operationally defined relationship value as the instrumentality of the relationship, that is, the extent to which the presence of the partner enhances the likelihood that an active goal will be achieved (see Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008). Recent studies have shown that the goal related instrumentality of a particular partner increases the sense of closeness to that partner (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008), which, in turn, facilitates the willingness to make an apology (Exline et al., 2007). Although both instrumentality and closeness may be considered to be related to relationship value, instrumentality is more directly relevant to one's fitness than closeness. Therefore, the present study focused on instrumentality as the primary independent variable, while controlling for the effect of closeness. In addition, a measure of expected forgiveness was included in the study, since Hodgins and Liebeskind (2003) showed that closeness fostered the perpetrators' expectation of being forgiven by their victims. However, the correlations between expected forgiveness and closeness were low or non-significant throughout the four studies. Therefore, these variables were simultaneously entered in the multiple regression analyses.

1.3. Overview of the research

This research consisted of four studies. Studies 1 and 2 asked participants to imagine that they had committed a particular interpersonal transgression against one of their actual friends, and to rate the instrumentality of the friend. Participants then indicated their willingness to undergo some inconvenience (e.g., cancelling an important meeting) to apologize to the friend (study 1) or to offer some compensation (study 2). Studies 3 and 4 were conducted to ensure the external validity of the findings from the first two studies. In studies 3 and 4, participants reported their real transgression experiences, and then reported instrumentality of the victim and whether they had made an apology and provided compensation. As many participants recalled events involving less intimate others in study 3, the victim was restricted to their friend or romantic partner in study 4.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and design

Participants were 546 undergraduate students (296 males, 249 females, and 1 unreported, $M_{AGE} \pm SD = 20.22 \pm 2.07$) from five Japanese universities. The majority of the participants ($n = 398$) filled out the questionnaire in a large class setting, while the remaining 148 participants completed the questionnaire in small group sessions. As 17 participants were excluded from the data analyses due to missing values, the effective sample size was 529.

Study 1 employed a 2 (victim type: best friend vs. casual friend) × 2 (scenario) between-participants factorial design. The victim type condition (i.e., closeness to the victim) was included in order to have a sufficient level of variance in instrumentality. Participants were asked to assume that they had inflicted harm on one of their best friends or on one of their casual friends. In addition, we developed two transgression scenarios to increase the generalizability of the results. One scenario described a situation in which participants unwittingly failed to arrive at a meeting place (no-show scenario). The other scenario described a situation in which participants unwittingly breached the friend's confidence (confidence-breaking scenario).

2.1.2. Composition of the questionnaire

Participants were first asked to identify one of their best or casual friends as a target by writing down that friend's initials. Then participants were asked several questions regarding the nature of their friendship with that target, including the target's instrumentality. Participants rated how useful or hindering the target was for them in achieving their goals in six domains (i.e., academic achievement, club activities, job searching activities, social relations, part-time job, and any other goal that they were pursuing) on a 7-point scale ranging from –3 (*very hindering*) to +3 (*very facilitating*). Although we expected the internal consistency of this measure to be low, since it aimed to cover a wide range of mutually independent goals (cf. John & Benet-Martinez, 2000), the internal consistency of the six items was reasonably high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$). These six items were aggregated to obtain the relationship instrumentality score.

Participants were then asked to imagine that they had committed one of the two types of interpersonal transgression. The transgression scenario was followed by the State Shame and Guilt Scale (SSGS), which was designed to assess feelings of guilt, shame, and pride (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). The SSGS was included to measure participants' feelings of guilt because a recent study demonstrated that perpetrator feels a stronger sense of guilt toward valuable partners than less valuable partners (Nelissen, 2014).

In study 1, costly apology was operationally defined as "cancelling other plans to make an apology as soon as possible." Participants were asked to assume that they had plans to engage in each of the following six activities: (i) go to a concert featuring their favorite musician, (ii) have dinner with a family member who lives in a distant place, (iii) visit a university's health center for a medical checkup, (iv) meet another friend to listen to his/her problem, (v) work a part-time job,