



## The apology mismatch: Asymmetries between victim's need for apologies and perpetrator's willingness to apologize

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ The present paper investigated the congruity between victims' and perpetrators' need for apologies
- ▶ A mismatch between victims' and perpetrators' need for apologies is observed
- ▶ This mismatch is driven by the intentionality of the transgression
- ▶ This effect was mediated by anger (victims) and guilt (perpetrators)
- ▶ This mismatch has consequences for actual apology behavior and subsequent forgiveness

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### ABSTRACT

Although previous research on apologies has shown that apologies can have many beneficial effects on victims' responses, the dyadic nature of the apology process has largely been ignored. As a consequence, very little is known about the congruence between perpetrators' willingness to apologize and victims' willingness to receive an apology. In three experimental studies we showed that victims mainly want to receive an apology after an intentional transgression, whereas perpetrators want to offer an apology particularly after an unintentional transgression. As expected, these divergent apologetic needs among victims and perpetrators were mediated by unique emotions: guilt among perpetrators and anger among victims. These results suggest that an apology serves very different goals among victims and perpetrators, thus pointing at an apology mismatch.

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Apologizing is an effective and widely supported response to transgressions (Cohen, 1999; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Kellerman, 2006; Meijer, 1998; Tavuchis, 1991; Van Dijke & De Cremer, 2011). From an early age, people learn to apologize when they are responsible for a transgression (Schlenker & Darby, 1981). Victims of transgressions are, in turn, socialized into graciously accepting such apologies (Bennett & Dewberry, 1994; Risen & Gilovich, 2007). The process where apologies lead to reconciliation is known as the "apology–forgiveness cycle" (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991).

The apology–forgiveness cycle is collectively rational because normative prescriptions for perpetrators to apologize and for victims to respond with forgiveness help to preserve social relationships after

conflict. Whether these normative prescriptions actually describe an empirical reality is a question that prior research has largely failed to address. The apology–forgiveness cycle seems to assume (at least implicitly) that victim and perpetrator are both motivated to reconcile. However, empirical studies show that victims and perpetrators often differ in their interpretations of critical aspects of transgressions, such as who is responsible for the transgression, its significance and its long-term effects (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Feeney & Hill, 2006; Mikula, Athenstaedt, Heschgl, & Heimgartner, 1998). If interpretations of conflict differ so much between victim and perpetrator, then are their views on the need for apologies congruent?

In this paper, we suggest that different emotions underlie the victims' and perpetrators' need for apologies: anger for the victims and guilt for the perpetrators. Since these emotions serve different functions and are activated by different types of situations, victims' and perpetrators' need for apologies may often be mismatched. This mismatch, we argue, can have important consequences for subsequent forgiveness and reconciliation between victim and perpetrator.

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## Need for apologies among victims and perpetrators

An apology is generally defined as a combined statement of an acknowledgement of wrongdoing and an expression of guilt (Lazare, 2004; Smith, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991). Since communicating such sentiments implies that the perpetrator believes that the transgression should not have happened and should not happen again, apologies also represent an implicit promise that the transgression will not be repeated (Kim, Dirks, & Cooper, 2009; Smith, 2008). Apologies, therefore, imply that perpetrators distance themselves from their prior actions and admit being wrong. The effectiveness of apologies in promoting trust and forgiveness among victims has been supported by a wealth of research (see e.g., Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002; De Cremer & Schouten, 2008; Exline, Deshea, & Holeman, 2007; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Van Dijke & De Cremer, 2011).

It is important to note that apologies have rather different meanings for victims and perpetrators, and they fulfill different psychological needs. According to the needs-based model of reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), transgressions deprive victims and perpetrators of different psychological needs. Victims may experience feelings of inferiority and anger in response to transgressions (Miller, 2001; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Perpetrators may suffer from fear of exclusion (Exline & Baumeister, 2000), and may therefore experience guilt (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Apologies provide a means for addressing these impaired needs (De Cremer, Pillutla, & Reinders Folmer, 2010; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). However, as victims and perpetrators require different needs to be restored, apologies serve a different function for either party.

For victims, apologies represent a compensation for having been victimized; a symbolic compensation for the injury suffered due to the offense (Tavuchis, 1991), and thus apologies address the state of inequity that arises when people are transgressed against (Exline et al., 2007). Anger is an emotion that is closely linked to a need for compensation and retribution (Darley & Pittman, 2003). We therefore expect that anger, which is central to the experience of injustice and victimization (Miller, 2001), drives victims' need for apologies. To our knowledge, no research has directly tested whether anger predicts a victim's need for apologies. However, there is some indirect evidence that supports this link. Anger has been linked to reconciliation attempts (Fischer & Roseman, 2007): a negative emotional reaction towards the perpetrator still leaves the possibility for reconciliation open. Since an apology is a reconciliation tool, one would expect that victims' need for apologies is positively related to anger.

For perpetrators, apologies are means for distancing themselves from their misdeeds (Goffman, 1971), and for restoring the relationship with the victim (e.g., Bottom et al., 2002; Leunissen, De Cremer, & Reinders Folmer, 2012). We believe that guilt may play a central role in the process that makes perpetrators apologize. Perpetrators may experience guilt in response to having committed an interpersonal transgression because such a transgression poses a threat to the relationship between the victim and perpetrator (Cryder, Springer, & Morewedge, 2012). The emotion of guilt, which is strongly related to the motivation to reconcile and improve the relationship with the victim (Baumeister et al., 1994), is likely to be central to the perpetrators' perception of the need for apologies. One would therefore expect that the guiltier the perpetrators feel, the more likely they will apologize.

In sum, apologies provide a means to fulfill the different needs of victims and perpetrators in the aftermath of transgressions. However, are the victim's and perpetrator's respective needs for apologies necessarily aligned with each other, as suggested by the apology–forgiveness cycle? Or in other words, are apologies provided by perpetrators when they are required by victims? We suggest that this may not be the case. Since the necessity of apologies for victims and perpetrators is linked to different emotions, we suggest that the need for apologies may often be mismatched: apologies are given when victims require them least, and not when they require them most.

This notion is best exemplified by considering the role of the intentionality of transgressions.

## Intentionality

Intentionality refers to an individual's desires, beliefs, awareness, and abilities to perform a particular action (Malle & Knobe, 1997; Malle & Nelson, 2003). An act is regarded as intentional if the actor sets out to perform the action and succeeds. In the case of transgressions, this means that the actor has willfully harmed the victim. Intentionality is of particular interest for the present research because it is a central element in the experience of transgressions and injustice. Perceptions of intentionality influence attributions of culpability and blameworthiness for transgressions, and people's tendency to respond to them with forgiveness or retribution (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Fincham, 2000; Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008). Importantly, intentionality has also been shown to influence the emotions that underlie victims' and perpetrators' apology needs, namely anger and guilt (McGraw, 1987). Therefore, intentionality may reveal when victims' and perpetrators' need for apology do or do not align.

How may intentionality affect the emotions that underlie the victims' and perpetrators' need for apology, and, consequently, their perceptions of that need? Intentional transgressions indicate that the harm suffered by the victim was due to the perpetrator (rather than to external circumstances). Hence they evoke more feelings of injustice (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Miller, 2001) and anger than unintentional transgressions do (Berkowitz & Heimer, 1989; Betancourt & Blair, 1992; Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998; Quigley & Tedeschi, 1996). Indeed, the relationship between the intentionality of the transgression and anger is one of the best-established findings in the justice literature (Miller, 2001). Intentional transgressions consequently lead to a victim having a stronger desire for compensation and retribution (Darley & Pittman, 2003). As such, it is likely that victims desire an apology particularly after *intentional* transgressions.

For perpetrators, the intentionality of a transgression is closely linked to guilt, being particularly experienced by perpetrators after unintentional transgressions (McGraw, 1987). According to Baumeister et al. (1994), there are two important sources of guilt. First, guilt is experienced as a result of anxiety for social exclusion. After an unintentional transgression, a valuable relationship is distorted beyond the perpetrators' will, as such, the perpetrator experiences anxiety over social exclusion as the victim might decide to end the relationship with the perpetrator. This anxiety results in feelings of guilt (Baumeister et al., 1994). When a perpetrator transgresses intentionally, the relationship with the victim is less likely to be important to him/her and relational deterioration is more likely to have been anticipated and considered acceptable. Thus, the perpetrator experiences less anxiety for social exclusion.

Intentionality also has important consequences for feelings of guilt because the former influences the empathy that perpetrators feel towards the victim. In the case of an intentional transgression, perpetrators are aware beforehand that they will commit the transgression (i.e., it is expected; McGraw, 1987). The perpetrator thus has had time to rationalize the transgression beforehand, thereby guarding him/herself against feelings of guilt (Baumeister, 1999; Tsang, 2002). In contrast, unintentional transgressions come unexpected to the perpetrator. Therefore, he/she does not have any rationalizations ready to guard him/herself against feelings of guilt. In short, these processes, anxiety for social exclusion and rationalizations, suggest that perpetrators will experience guilt particularly after unintentional transgressions and as a consequence, will want to apologize particularly after unintentional, rather than intentional transgressions.

In sum, these arguments lead us to predict a mismatch between the victims' and the perpetrators' need for apology. Because victims and perpetrators may desire apologies after different types of transgressions, this apology mismatch could have important consequences for

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