



Shifting identification: A theory of apologies and pseudo-apologies



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ABSTRACT

This paper combines the concept of identification with balance theory and co-orientation theory to show how public apologies and pseudo-apologies can be used to shift identification among offenders, victims, third parties, and offensive acts. A new theory of apologizing is offered to explain why pseudo-apologies are more effective than genuine apologies at repairing one's public image in some situations. Three case studies from the existing literature on public apologies are used to illustrate the theory.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Growing interest in public apologies

Apologies have become a staple of public discourse. Apologies by politicians, celebrities, corporations, and even religious organizations have received extensive news coverage and academic study (Hearit, 2006). Scholars across various disciplines have theorized about how apologies ought to be performed and how apologies work to restore relationships and reputations (e.g., Boyd, 2011; Koesten & Rowland, 2004; Tavuchis, 1991).

Because apologies are studied from so many perspectives, apologies are often defined and operationalized in different ways (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, & Johansen, 2010). At a minimum, apologies require an offender to accept responsibility for an offensive act and express regret to the offended party (Benoit, 1995; Lazare, 2004). Apologies make it possible for offenders to receive forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997), to repair their public image (Hearit, 2006), and to symbolically rejoin society as members in good standing (Goffman, 1971; Tavuchis, 1991).

1.2. Pseudo-apologies common in public discourse

With the growing interest in apologies, a number of observers have also noted a rise in *pseudo-apologies* (Gruber, 2011; Lazare, 2004), sometimes called *non-apologies* (Eisinger, 2011; Kampf, 2009) or *simulated atonement* (Shepard, 2009). Pseudo-apologies are rhetorical acts that contain language such as "I'm sorry" or "I apologize," but fall short of genuine apologies in

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various ways. Pseudo-apologies may minimize the severity of an offense or express sympathy without taking responsibility (Lazare, 2004; Kampf, 2009). Corporations often issue pseudo-apologies instead of genuine apologies due to liability concerns (Hearit, 2006). Interestingly, there are situations where pseudo-apologies seem to be *more* effective than genuine apologies at restoring an offender's public image (Eisinger, 2011).

The purpose of this article is to illustrate how apologies and pseudo-apologies can be used to shift identification among offenders, victims, third parties, and offensive acts. Particular attention will be paid to situations in which pseudo-apologies are more effective at image repair than genuine apologies. This line of inquiry has practical applications for the fields of political communication and crisis communication, as well as theoretical implications for rhetorical criticism. After briefly reviewing foundational literature on apologies, this article will propose a new theory of apologies as identification management strategies and then highlight three cases from existing apology literature to illustrate the central argument.

2. Background on apologies

This section addresses (1) what is an apology, (2) how an apology works, and (3) what constitutes a pseudo-apology.

2.1. Defining an apology

Apologies are acknowledgements “that one has *no* excuse, defense justification, or explanation for an action” (Tavuchis, 1991, p. 17). Apologies are a sub-genre of *apologia* or image repair discourse (Benoit, 1995; Koesten & Rowland, 2004). Goffman (1971) described an apology as “a gesture through which an individual splits himself [*sic*] into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the delict [*i.e.*, violation of law] and affirms a belief in the offended rule” (p. 113). Lazare (2004) defined apologies as encounters “between two parties in which one party, the offender, acknowledges responsibility for an offense or grievance and expresses regret or remorse to a second party, the aggrieved” (p. 23).

In *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1961), Burke drew on the religious imagery of a sacrificial kill when he described apologies as *mortification*. As Foss, Foss, and Trapp (2002) explained, “Mortification is self-inflicted punishment, self-sacrifice, or self-imposed denials and restrictions designed to slay characteristics, impulses, or aspects of the self” (p. 231). Mortification deals with guilt by taking responsibility for it and paying a price. Koesten and Rowland (2004) extended Burke's concept of mortification to describe the rhetorical genre of *atonement*, which is characterized by repentance, prayer (*i.e.*, reflection leading to change), charity (*i.e.*, reparations), authenticity, and public confession.

Scholars across various disciplines agree that a genuine apology must acknowledge responsibility for the offense (Benoit, 1995; Hearit, 2006; Lazare, 2004; Scher & Darley, 1997; Tavuchis, 1991). Most scholars also believe an apology should express remorse and promise not to repeat the offense (Hearit, 2006; Scher & Darley, 1997; Tavuchis, 1991). Some writers hold that an apology is incomplete without an explanation of what happened and an offer of reparations (Hearit, 2006; Lazare, 2004), but others argue that explanations (Scher & Darley, 1997) or reparations (Benoit, 1995) are separate from the act of apologizing. At a minimum, then, genuine apologies involve taking responsibility, expressing regret, and at least implicitly promising not to repeat an offensive act.

2.2. How apologies work

In the diverse literature on apologies, there are several mechanisms by which apologies are thought to repair relationships and reputations. Lazare (2004) held that apologies are therapeutic for victims, restoring victims' dignity, providing closure, and allowing victims to see their offenders suffer humiliation. McCullough et al. (1997) argued that apologies lead to forgiveness by helping victims empathize with offenders (*i.e.*, understand the offender's perspective). Weiner (2006) used attribution theory to explain that when offenders apologize, victims are less likely to attribute the offense to internal, stable, or controllable factors. Thus, victims come to see the offense as a one-time mistake rather than an expression of *who the offender is*.

Apologies have also been explained as public rituals to atone for wrongdoing (Hearit, 2006; Tavuchis, 1991). As mentioned already, Burke's (1961) theory of mortification requires a symbolic “death” or a “sacrifice” (p. 208). When people apologize, Goffman (1971) believed they symbolically split themselves into “a blameworthy part and a part that stands back and sympathizes with the blame giving” (Goffman, 1971, p. 113).

According to this symbolic perspective, apologies require people to perform a kind of penance by humbling themselves before the victim or before society as a whole. When people perform this ritual properly they demonstrate that they deserve to be “brought back into the fold” (Goffman, 1971, p. 113). In the case of public offenses, even an apology that does not result in forgiveness from the victim may “complete the ritualistic cycle of transgression and absolution” and thus “deprive journalists of a continuing story,” (Hearit, 1994, p. 122). Thus, offenders can sometimes repair their public image by offering apologies that do not satisfy their victims.

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