



## On the acceptance of apologies



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### ABSTRACT

An apology is a strong and cheap device to restore social or economic relationships that have been disturbed. In a laboratory experiment in which apologies emerge endogenously, we find that harmdoers use apologies in particular if they fear punishment and if their intentions cannot be easily inferred. After offenses with ambiguous intention punishment for apologizers is lower than for non-apologizers. Victims expect an apology and punish if they do not receive one. An apology does not help at all after clearly intentionally committed offenses. On the contrary, after such offenses an apology strongly increases punishment compared to remaining silent.

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An apology is the superglue of life. It can repair just about anything.  
(Lynn Johnston, Canadian Cartoonist)

### 1. Introduction

Apologies are remarkable. After an offense they restore social order without amending the offense. No material has been exchanged, yet the relationship between harmdoer and harmed party has improved (Tavuchis, 1991). Apologies can enhance many kinds of economic and social relationships that are upset. They are used in everyday life between individuals, between co-workers and business partners. Apologies can influence the outcome of elections and accelerate peace negotiations. Since people are part of several networks of relations, apologies are omnipresent. But why do apologies work? They cannot undo the offense and they cannot repair the caused damage either. We suggest that apologies work because they can help to reveal the intention behind the preceding offense. After an offense, a victim usually does not know whether the harmdoer is a friendly person who harmed accidentally or whether the harmdoer intended to harm. However, the victim's reaction strongly depends on the offender's type. Anger after intentional offenses is stronger than for accidental harm. An apology is an offender's chance to inform the victim about his type. This information can of course be a lie or the truth. But if at least some people have a preference for telling the truth, an apologizer is less likely to be an intentional harmdoer than a non-apologizer. Is this the reason why apologies work?

In a laboratory experiment we create an environment where people can economically harm others and where apologies for offenses are appropriate and reasonable. We control for clearly intentional offenses and offenses with ambiguous intentionality, where the latter in our design can have two reasons: either they are committed intentionally or due to inability. The novelty of our design is that the offender is always responsible for the offense, but did not necessarily commit the

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offense intentionally. The design also allows the offender to write a message after harming. Our study is the first that not only analyzes the victims' reactions to apologies but also focuses on the offenders' motives for sending an apology. We therefore do not restrict messages to ready-made output but let participants write individual messages. We are interested in the kind of messages offenders will write and whether apologies naturally occur. After the message the victim can punish the harmdoer.

We find that an apology is in fact the most common message after an offense. Harmdoers apologize for their offense—even if the apology is costly. However, in contrast to the quote at the beginning, an apology does not 'repair just about anything'. We find that apologies do not 'glue' at all after clearly intentionally committed offenses. On the contrary, after such offenses harmdoers do better not to apologize since sending an apology in this situation strongly increases punishment compared to just remaining silent. In situations where the intention behind the offense is ambiguous, apologies are a very powerful instrument: Harmdoers who apologize are punished less strongly than harmdoers who remain quiet. Victims seem to expect those responsible for the offense to sincerely apologize. Foregoing the opportunity to apologize seems to worsen the offense and therefore increases punishment. Victims seem to trust that an apology is more than the attempt to get around trouble or punishment. Our results show that this assumption is naïve. We find that offenders primarily apologize if they fear punishment for the offense. Evidently it is not remorse that makes a harmdoer apologize but the hope to prevent punishment. Nevertheless, apologies work. They decrease punishment.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. The next section summarizes related literature. Section 3 introduces the experimental design. Section 4 gives predictions. Section 5 presents the results and Section 6 concludes.

## 2. Related literature

The focus of our paper is the analysis and the experimental investigation of apologies occurring in a controlled but natural situation. In our design, harmdoers can write messages to the harmed party. The messages are not predefined. Therefore, apologies emerge endogenously. In this respect we differ strongly from previous studies analyzing apologies. Previous studies show the impact of apologies using predefined situation settings, usually manipulating or simulating the role of the apologizer (Abeler et al., 2010; Bottom et al., 2002; Ohtsubo and Watanabe, 2009; Schweitzer et al., 2006; Skarlicki et al., 2004; Ho, 2012).

In psychology, the impact of apologies has been studied for a long time and there is a large body of evidence that a harmdoer who sends an apology is much more likely to be forgiven than a non-apologizer. Most of these studies can be grouped into three categories. In the first category psychologists present vignettes describing situations in which an offender did or did not apologize. Participants then make judgments about the offender. (See for example Ohbuchi and Sato, 1994; Weiner et al., 1991; Girard et al., 2002; Ohtsubo and Watanabe, 2009; Wada, 1998; Scher and Darley, 1997.) The second category includes studies where participants have to remember past self-experienced situations. They are told to recall whether the offender did or did not apologize and to give explanations of how they felt in this particular situation and whether they accepted the apology. (See for example Exline et al., 2007; McCullough et al. 1997, 1998; Schmitt et al., 2004.) The third category uses deceptive role-play with actual offenses (Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Struthers et al., 2008). All three categories document that apologies have a mitigating effect on anger and increase forgiveness.

Forgiveness is less likely following an apology when offenders have intentionally committed an offense than when offenses were clearly unintentional (Struthers et al., 2008; Skarlicki et al., 2004). In the latter study, receivers of an unfair offer in an ultimatum game accept this offer less often after an apology than after no message was sent. Since in this case an unfair offer is always made intentionally, these results show that after intentionally committed harm an apology can backfire and even increase punishment. For this reason, our study provides a direct comparison of apologies after intentionally committed offenses and offenses with ambiguous intention. In contrast to our study Ho (2012) provides an environment where an offense can be either intentional or due to a move by nature. Harmdoers are therefore not necessarily responsible for the outcome.

It is not clear yet how offers of compensation affect forgiveness. On the one hand, several studies show that compensation payments can increase forgiveness (Bottom et al., 2002; Schmitt et al., 2004; Scher and Darley, 1997; Ohtsubo and Watanabe, 2009; Witvliet et al., 2002; Zechmeister and Romero, 2002). On the other hand, Abeler et al. (2010) find that customers who receive an apology instead of monetary compensation forgive significantly more often. The authors argue that getting paid money could reduce the intrinsic motivation of customers to forgive (as in Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000) and that an apology might trigger a heuristic to forgive that is hard to overcome rationally.

There are different ways to measure forgiveness. Vignette studies and studies using self-experienced situations (see above) measure forgiveness using questionnaires. Ho (2012), Bottom et al. (2002) and Schweitzer et al. (2006) analyze repeated interactions and use behavior in period  $t + 1$  as a measure for forgiveness for the counterpart's behavior in period  $t$ . As mentioned above, Skarlicki et al. (2004) use the acceptance rate in the ultimatum game as a measure for forgiveness. We directly measure forgiveness using punishment.

## 3. Experimental design and procedure

Our basic design is similar to Ho (2012) who uses a trust game with an apology option at the end. We use a sequential prisoner's dilemma in which the second mover can apologize and the first mover can punish. Our contribution is a manipu-

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