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How Important Is an Apology to You? Forecasting Errors in Evaluating the Value of Apologies

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Abstract

Apologies are commonly used to deal with transgressions in relationships. Results to date, however, indicate that the positive effects of apologies vary widely, and the match between people's judgments of apologies and the true value of apologies has not been studied. Building on the affective and behavioral forecasting literature, we predicted that people would overestimate how much they value apologies in reality. Across three experimental studies, our results showed that after having been betrayed by another party (or after imagining this to be the case), people (a) rated the value of an apology much more highly when they imagined receiving an apology than when they actually received an apology and (b) displayed greater trusting behavior when they imagined receiving an apology than when they actually received an apology. These results suggest that people are prone to forecasting errors regarding the effectiveness of an apology and that they tend to overvalue the impact of receiving one.

Keywords

A common response to transgressions is the use of an apology (Goffman, 1971; Schlenker, 1980). In fact, apologies are so ubiquitous in human interaction that it seems as though an "apology culture" has developed (Kellerman, 2006). The proffering and acceptance of apologies begins at an early age, because children are taught to apologize for harm and to accept apologies graciously at school, at the playground, and at home. However, children do sometimes fail to graciously accept apologies and reconcile with the transgressors. Ironically, the failure to accept an apology transforms the victim into the transgressor, a fact that highlights the importance people assign to apologies when dealing with transgressions. Why do people value apologies so much?

Risen and Gilovich (2007) suggested that apologies serve several social functions. First, they represent an acknowledgment that social rules have been broken, and they reaffirm the legitimacy of those rules (Darby & Schlenker, 1982). Second, they restore the dignity of the victim and facilitate the reconciliation between the transgressor and the victim (e.g., Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004), thus reestablishing normal social interaction (Bennett & Dewberry, 1994; Goffman, 1955) and restoring social order. Not accepting an apology derails this process, which is why people assign so much importance to the gracious acceptance of an apology.

People are therefore socialized into both offering an apology when things go wrong (Kellerman, 2006) and accepting an apology when offered one (Bennett & Dewberry, 1994; Risen & Gilovich, 2007). But are apologies effective in remedying transgressions all the time? Some studies show that damaged relationships and breached trust may be gradually repaired when an apology is given and responsibility for the transgression is acknowledged (Kim et al., 2004; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004), whereas other studies show that apologies do not facilitate reconciliation (De Cremer & Schouten, 2008; Riordan, Marlin, & Kellogg, 1983; Schlenker, 1980; Sigal, Hsu, Foodim, & Betman, 1988) and may even elicit further distrust and anger when they are perceived as insincere and strategic (De Cremer, van Dijk, & Pillutla, 2010; Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004).

These inconsistent results stand in contrast to what people have been taught to believe about the power of apologies. They also raise the question of whether people overestimate

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the effect that apologies will have. People may expect apologies to be more valuable and effective than they actually are, because people have been socialized into thinking that apologies should be accepted, and that accepting one will make the offended party feel better. In practice, however, the acceptance of apologies may not always have this effect.

In this article, we present a study contrasting individuals' predictions about the effectiveness of apologies with their actual reactions to apologies after being harmed. In examining this question, we rely on the affective and behavioral forecasting literature (Gilbert & Wilson, 2000; Newby-Clark, Ross, Buehler, Koehler, & Griffin, 2000). What is apparent from this literature is that people are not very good forecasters. For example, research shows that individuals are quite limited in predicting the level of distress they will experience following emotional events (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998; for reviews, see Wilson & Gilbert, 2003, 2005). In fact, such studies have revealed that participants consistently overestimate their future emotional reactions to both positive and negative events (Gilbert et al., 1998; Wilson, Wheatley, Meyers, Gilbert, & Axsom, 2000). Literature on behavioral forecasting shows that people overestimate their tendency to engage in socially desirable behaviors, such as being generous or cooperative (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Sherman, 1980), and they underestimate their tendency toward deviant and cruel behaviors, such as administering electric shocks (Milgram, 1974).

Building on this literature, we expected people who view apologies as socially desirable following interpersonal transgressions to overestimate the value of an apology. Specifically, we predicted that people would value an apology very positively when asked to imagine being harmed and receiving an apology, but that their actual (judgmental and behavioral) reactions upon receiving an apology would be less favorable than they expected. This phenomenon could help to explain the inconsistency between the ubiquity of apologies in social life and their mixed effects as noted in the literature.

In our research, we focused on two dependent measures. First, we assessed forecasting errors in participants' judgments of how much they would value receiving an apology (pilot study and Study 1). Second, we assessed forecasting errors in participants' willingness to reinitiate trusting behavior in a trust game (Study 2).

Pilot Study

We first tested our predictions in a pilot study in which we directly compared participants' predictions concerning the value of an apology with their actual experience when receiving an apology. We did this by comparing a condition in which participants imagined receiving an apology after a transgression with a condition in which they received an actual apology. We predicted that participants would value an apology more when they imagined receiving one than when they actually received one from the transgressor.

Method

Ninety-seven undergraduate students participated voluntarily and were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. On arrival in the laboratory, each participant was placed in a separate experimental cubicle containing a table, a chair, and a computer. In the *real-interaction* condition, participants were paired with another person who was present in the laboratory. Participants were given €10, which they could either keep or transfer to their partner. They were told that the experimenter would triple every euro transferred before giving the money to the partner and that the partner would decide how much of the tripled money to keep and how much to send back to the participant (i.e., the trust game developed by Berg, Dickhaut, & McCabe, 1995). Participants then decided whether or not they wanted to transfer their €10 to their partner. (Only the 90% of participants who transferred their €10 were included in the analyses.) The money that was transferred was tripled by the experimenter, meaning that the partner received €30. Participants were subsequently told that their partner had given them €5 back. They then received a message from their partner in which he apologized, saying that he was sorry that he took more than his fair share and taking full responsibility for the unfair offer of €5. In the *scenario* condition, participants were asked to imagine that they played this game, transferred €10 to the other person, and received €5 and an (identical) apology in return.

Results

We then assessed how "valuable" and "reconciling" participants judged the provision of an apology to be (on a 7-point scale from 1, *not at all*, to 7, *very much so*; $r = .41$, $p < .001$). An analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the average evaluation score revealed that participants in the real-interaction condition considered the provision of the apology to be less valuable than those in the scenario condition did ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.57$, vs. $M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.23$), $F(1, 86) = 4.84$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$.

Study 1

Our pilot study showed that participants judged receiving an apology more positively when they imagined receiving an apology than when they actually received an apology. These findings provide initial evidence that people make errors when forecasting the value of an apology after they are exploited. The findings of our pilot study set the stage for us to directly examine whether the forecasting error would generalize to comparisons involving only real interactions in which victims of a transgression judged the value of an apology either when forecasting its effectiveness or when actually receiving it. If the value of apologies is indeed overestimated, then participants who imagine receiving an apology after a transgression should evaluate the apology as more valuable than participants who actually receive an apology. Therefore, in contrast to our pilot

study, Study 1 did not include a comparison condition in which participants imagined experiencing a transgression; rather, all participants in Study 1 experienced an actual transgression, and it was only the apology that was either imagined or real.

Method

Fifty-seven undergraduate students participated voluntarily. They were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. The experimental procedure was identical to that used in the pilot study except that participants in both conditions played the trust game (92% of the participants transferred their initial endowment of €10). In addition, half of the participants actually received an apology (the same one as in Study 1), whereas the other half did not receive an apology but were asked to imagine receiving one. Participants responded to the same two evaluation questions asked in the pilot study ($r = .86$, $p < .001$).

Results

An ANOVA on the average evaluation score revealed that participants in the real-apology condition considered the provision of the apology to be less valuable than those in the imagined-apology condition ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.76$, vs. $M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.22$), $F(1, 51) = 17.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .25$. Thus, individuals who did not receive an actual apology but imagined receiving one rated the apology as more valuable than individuals who actually received one.

Study 2

The results of Study 1 showed that an apology was rated as more valuable when people imagined receiving one than when they were actually given one. These results again indicate that people seem to overestimate the value of an apology. In a final experiment, we tested whether this forecasting error might be reflected not only in participants' evaluations, but also in their behavior toward the transgressor. As apologies are used to restore relationships and thus to rebuild interpersonal trust (Kim et al., 2004), we focused on trusting behavior. That is, we examined how imagining being exploited and receiving an apology, relative to actually being exploited and receiving an apology, would affect participants' allocations in a second trust game.

Method

Forty-two undergraduate students participated voluntarily. They were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. The experiment again employed the trust game. As in the pilot study, participants in the scenario condition imagined transferring their €10 to the partner, receiving €5 in return, and receiving an apology; those in the real-interaction condition actually decided whether or not to transfer their €10 (all participants did), received €5 in return, and received a real apology. The dependent measure was the amount of money participants

transferred in a second trust game.[1] Because participants were exploited in the first game, this amount is a behavioral measure of trust restoration.

Results

An ANOVA on the amount of money transferred in the second game revealed that participants in the real-interaction condition ($M = \$3.31$, $SD = 2.19$) showed less trust behavior than those in the scenario condition ($M = \$5.20$, $SD = 3.38$), $F(1, 40) = 4.66$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .17$. These results again support our hypothesis that people overestimate the effect of apologies, in this case showing that people display more trusting behavior when they imagine receiving an apology following a transgression than when they actually do receive one.

General Discussion

These studies demonstrate that people overestimate the value and behavioral impact of an apology. Across three studies, we showed that people valued an apology much more, and displayed more trusting behavior, when they imagined receiving an apology (following either a real or an imagined transgression) than when they actually received an apology. These results indicate that people may have more faith in an apology's effectiveness as a reconciliation or trust-repair tool when they consider its value beforehand than when they actually receive one.

Our participants' beliefs in the value of apologies are consistent with the literature to date, which appears to suggest that apologies are an effective tool to repair relationships after transgressions have taken place. However, our results suggest that apologies do not alleviate victims' concerns to the extent that they expect. Victims who receive apologies in the immediate aftermath of harm do not seem to appreciate the apologies as much as they anticipated they would, as evidenced by the greater rated value of imagined than actual apologies. Perhaps the value of apologies, then, may lie in convincing observers (and not victims) that the transgressor is a good person. This view is supported by empirical evidence that observers think less well of victims who reject apologies than of those who accept them, even when the apologies are patently insincere (cf. Bennett & Dewberry, 1994; Risen & Gilovich, 2007).

If an apology is indeed a valued impression tool, then the delivery of an apology could be considered a first, necessary step in the reconciliation process—a step that must be combined with other forms of amends in order to be evaluated as valuable (and as effective as victims forecast). One potentially effective combination—and one that is relevant in the context of the trust game—may be an apology together with financial compensation that restores the incurred tangible losses. Future research should focus on the effectiveness of such combinations. Future studies should also explore whether the delivery of an apology may be sufficient in the context of close relationships (note that the present studies involved interactions

between strangers). In close relationships, people may be particularly interested in knowing about the good or bad intentions of the transgressor and less interested in receiving substantive compensation. Finally, researchers should consider including a no-apology condition in future studies, to test whether people may overpredict the value of an apology to such an extent that their disappointment when actually receiving one makes them react more negatively than if no apology had been made.

Conventional wisdom suggests that it is important to apologize and act responsibly after transgressing if one aims to achieve reconciliation. However, it is important to realize that an apology alone will not achieve the desired result. An apology seems to be only the first step of the reconciliation process, because people do not react as positively toward an apology as they think they will.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Note

1. Although participants had to choose between transferring either €10 or nothing in the first game, in the second game they could transfer any amount between €0 and €10.

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