Do People Reject Apology for Group Harms? A Cross-Cultural Consideration

Do People Reject Apology for Group Harms?
A Cross-Cultural Consideration

KEN-ICHI OHBUCHI （大渕憲一）[1], EMI ATSUMI （渥美恵美）[2],
and SEIJI TAKAKU （高久聖治）[3]

In the present study, we attempted to examine the determinants of account selection which plays a crucial role in conflict resolution. In a series of role-play studies, we found that the account selection is made on a single dimension which ranges from responsibility acceptance (apology) to rejection (excuse, justification, and denial). A major determinant of account selection was the private judgment of responsibility which prompts responsibility-rejecting accounts. Motivational variables also affected this selection process such that the need for social acceptance prompts responsibility-accepting account, while the concern for self-esteem prompts responsibility-rejecting accounts. Assuming that cultural values differ in these motivational variables, we construed and supported a hypothesis that collectivists prefer responsibility-accepting account, while individualists prefer responsibility-rejecting accounts, suggesting that cultural divergence exists in the motivational processes involved in the account selection. Although our hypothesis that harm-doers with collective values would be less likely to accept responsibility in inter-group conflicts was not supported, there was an interesting interaction on account selection between the conflict situations (interpersonal vs. inter-group) and cultural values: those with individualistic values selected more responsibility-rejecting accounts in interpersonal conflicts, probably to protect their personal self-esteem, but not in inter-group conflicts. The opposite pattern was observed for those with collectivistic values.

Key words: apology, conflict, group, culture, collectivism

Account Selection and its Determinants

In this article, we will discuss the role of apology in conflict resolution, especially focusing on cultural values and the type of conflict situation; that is, whether the conflict is interpersonal or inter-group in nature.

People often resort to aggression when they get involved in conflicts with others. This is mainly because both parties tend to perceive themselves as being victimized by the other party, thereby escalating their feelings of anger and hostility against each other. As such, both parties demand apology from each other, as well as compensation for their loss and damage (Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). In fact, the past apology research (Cody & McLaughlin, 1990; Holtgraves, 1989; Ohbuchi, Kameda, Agarie, 1989; Takaku, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2001) convincingly suggests that offering of an apology is one of the most effective way to resolve conflicts. Thus, it is crucial to investigate under what conditions people involved in conflicts are more or less likely to apologize and why.

1   Department of Psychology, Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University, Kawauchi, Aoba Ward
    Sdendai, Miyagi Prefecture, 981-8576, Japan.
2   Department of Rehabilitation, School of Medical Sciences, Tohoku Bunka Gakuen University, Kunimi 6-45,
    Aoba Ward, Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture, 981-8551, Japan.
3   Department of Psychology, Soka University of America, 1 University, Aliso Viejo, CA92656, U.S.A.

Conflict Resolution and Account Making

Account is a set of verbal messages that are made by harm-doer to publicly explain his/her association with a negative event or a social or an interpersonal transgression. There are several different types of accounts, and among them, apology is an account used to express one's acknowledgment of responsibility, consideration for victim, remorse, and promise for future good deed (Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Schoenbach, 1990). A full-fledged apology consists of all the components; for example, "I am sorry. It's my fault. I regret what I did to you. I promise you that I'll never do such a thing." In most cases, simpler apologies are used, consisting of small number of components; for example, "I am sorry. I'll never do it." In any case, an essential component of apology is the public acknowledgment of responsibility for the harm done.

When a harm-doer makes apology, even if not overtly acknowledging personal responsibility, victims tend to infer that the harm-doer did take personal responsibility in the harm-done, which calms their anger and hostility, allowing them to rationally cope with the conflict. However, despite such calming effects apology might bring, a harm-doer does not always acknowledge his/her responsibility and apologize. Instead, he/she makes responsibility-rejecting accounts such as excuse or justification. Excuse is a type of account that attributes responsibility to external/uncontrollable factors such as the situation. For example, when coming late to a meeting, one might say: "I got caught in traffic." Justification is a type of account that appeals to a higher moral principle. For example, when coming late to a meeting, one might say, "I had to stop and help someone who really needed my help." These responsibility-rejecting accounts tend to evoke a victim's negative emotions and aggressive reactions as they are not consistent with what the victim wants to hear, so they tend to escalate the conflict.

Dimension of and Determinants of Account Selection

In a study conducted by Ohbuchi, Suzuki, & Takaku (2003), we asked Japanese and American participants to read conflict scenarios in the place of harm-doer and to rate how they would be likely to use apology, excuse, and justification. Factor analysis of the ratings produced only one dimension to which apology had a positive loading (.89) and excuse and justification had negative loadings (-.93 and -.90; % of variance accounted = 72.2). This indicates that accounts are selected according to whether harm-doer decides to acknowledge responsibility or reject responsibility.

Then, an important question is what determines the account selection. Theoretical and empirical research on accounts has suggested a number of determinants of account selection (Gonzales, Manning, & Haugen, 1992; Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Takaku, 2000). In the study (Ohbuchi et al., 2003), we further attempted to examine the effects of a number of cognitive and motivational determinants and found that among others, the most powerful determinant of account selection was the private judgment of responsibility (PJR). PJR is the extent to which a harm-doer perceives he/she is personally responsible for the conflict. A correlation between PJR and account selection (the higher scores mean the use of apology, while the lower scores mean the use of excuse or justification) was highly positive (r = .752), meaning that if a harm-doer perceived it was his/her fault, the harm-doer was very likely to select apology. In contrast, if a harm-doer believed it was not his/her fault, the harm-doer was very likely to select excuse or

justification. Since account-making is to publicly express one's responsibility, it seems natural that it depends on the harm-doer's private judgment of responsibility.

Effects of Cognitive and Motivational Variables on Account Selection

However, this sometimes yields a difficult problem for conflict resolution. Research has indicated that people tend to perceive conflict situations in a self-serving manner, that is, both parties tend perceive that they are not responsible for the conflict (Gelfand, Higgins, Nishii, Raver, Dominguez, Murakami, Yamaguchi, & Toyama, 2002; Ohbuchi, Fukushima, & Fukuno, 1995; Takaku, Lee, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2005). As a result, not only the victim, but also the harm-doer rejects responsibility. For this reason, if account selection is largely determined only by PJR, apology is unlikely to take place, so the conflict may become difficult to resolve.

In addition to this cognitive variable (i.e., PJR), we assume that motivational variables influence account selection. There are two distinctive sets of motivational determinants. One includes the need for social acceptance, which may encourage the use of apology. Even when a participant privately believes that he/she is not wrong, he/she will be likely to make an apology if he/she does not want to be disliked by others. The other set of motivational variables includes the concerns for self-interest and self-esteem, which, in contrast, may encourage responsibility-rejecting accounts such as excuse and justification. Those who are strongly concerned with their personal interests will be reluctant to make an apology because they are afraid that the acknowledgment of responsibility leads to undesirable costs such as being imposed of compensation. Further, apology may give a threat to self-esteem because it is to recognize the fault of one' own in public. Therefore, when a need for protection of one's self-esteem is strongly evoked, responsibility-rejecting accounts, instead of apology, is likely to be selected.

In order to test these predictions, we conducted a regression analysis on the data obtained in the above mentioned study (Ohbuchi et al., 2003), in which a dependent variable was account selection and independent variables were PJR, need for social acceptance, and the concerns for self-esteem and self-interests. Table 1 indicates that PJR and the need for social acceptance increased responsibility-accepting account (apology), while the concern for self-esteem decreased apology or increased responsibility-rejecting accounts (excuse and justification). In this analysis, the concern for self-interests did not have any unique effect on account selection. The finding suggests that when a harm-doer is concerned with social acceptance, he/she is likely to select

Table 1   The results of stepwise regression analysis for account selection.

Independent variables	Beta
Private judgment of responsibility (PJR)	.596**
Need for social acceptance	.104**
Concern for self-esteem	-.376**
Concern for self-interests	
R²	.677**

Note. Adapted from Ohbuchi et al. (2003): N = 444; ** p < .01.

apology. This account selection may lead to the settlement of conflict. In contrast, if a harm-doer is concerned with self-esteem, he/she is likely to select responsibility-rejecting accounts. And, this account selection may lead to escalation of conflict. From a social psychological standpoint, this means that motivational variables determine account selection, which in turn influences the outcome of conflict resolution.

Cultural Differences in Account Selection and Conflict Situations

Cultural Values and Account Selection

Researchers have been interested in cultural differences in conflict resolution and account selections for over a couple of decades (e.g., Gelfand & Brett, 2004; Hamilton & Hagiwara, 1992, Leung, 1987; Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994; Takaku, 2000) and many important findings have been documented. For example, Itoi, Ohbuchi, and Fukuno (1996) compared the account selection between American and Japanese participants in conflict situations using a role-play procedure. The results indicated that Japanese people relatively preferred apology, while American people relatively preferred excuse and justification. Takaku (2000) further demonstrated that this cultural effect is moderated by the status information of the parties involved in the conflict. While Americans are relatively less influenced by the status information, Japanese are found to select different accounts as a function of the victim's status. Cultural psychologists further argue that among Asian people including Japanese, collectivistic values are prevalent, in which group integrity, social harmony, and maintenance of relationships are predominant; on the other hand, personal achievement and independence are valued in individualistic cultures, which are prevalent in Western societies such as USA (Triandis, 1995). We assume that, in general, collectivists tend to select responsibility-accepting accounts (apology) in conflict situations because they have a strong need for social acceptance, while individualists prefer responsibility-rejecting accounts (excuse and justification) because they are strongly concerned with self-esteem.

A number of scales to measure Individualism-collectivism (I-C) have been developed by cultural researchers. It is a complex value construct consisting of diverse concerns and orientations. Triandis and Gelfand (1998) elaborated it by combining I-C dimension and a Vertical-Horizontal dimension. They developed a new scale to measure four sub-dimensions of I-C: Horizontal Individualism (HI), Horizontal Collectivism (HC), Vertical Individualism (VI), and Vertical Collectivism (VC). Among them, HI and HC are especially relevant to account selection because they seem to differ in the motivations that we found as relevant to account selection (Ohbuchi et al., 2003). HI people want to be unique and distinct from groups and are highly self-reliant. HC people see themselves as being similar to others and emphasize interdependence and sociability. So, we predict that HC people will prefer account-accepting account (apology) in conflict situations because they have a high level of need for social acceptance, while HI people will prefer account-rejecting accounts (excuse and justification) because they are strongly motivated by protection of personal self-esteem.

Table 2   Regression analysis of account selection by motivational variables among HI and HC.

Independent variables	Beta	
	HI	HC
Private judgment of responsibility (PJR)	.351**	
Concern for self-esteem	-.243**	
Need for social acceptance	.576**	.425**
R^2	.449**	.340**

Notes. Adapted from Ohbuchi et al. (2006); ** p < .01.

In order to examine these cross-cultural hypotheses, we recently conducted a role-playing study using American and Japanese participants (Ohbuchi, Takaku, & Shirakane, 2006). Based on the participants' cultural values measured by the Triandis and Gelfand's scale, we selected HI and HC participants and examined what motivational variables determined the account selection by conducting regression analysis separately with each group of participants. Table 2 indicates that the need for social acceptance significantly increased the responsibility-accepting account in both HI and HC groups, while the effects of the other motivational variables on account selection differed between HI and HC groups. Consistent with one of the above hypotheses, the concern for self-esteem increased responsibility-rejecting accounts only among individualists, but it did not affect the account selection of collectivists.

Conflict Situations (Interpersonal vs. Inter-group Conflicts) and Account Selection

In the same study, we further examined the relationships among cultural values, account selection, and conflict situations. It is generally believed that inter-group conflicts are more difficult to resolve than interpersonal conflicts. Possible reasons for poor conflict resolution in inter-group situations are that it takes longer time to make a group decision and the group decision is likely to be adversely affected by groupthink or risky shift. We assume that there is still another reason, that is, apology is less likely to take place in inter-group conflicts than in interpersonal conflicts.

We have seen that account selection depends on private judgment of responsibility (PJR). Personal responsibility tends to become diffused in inter-group situations, so people involved in group conflicts may underestimate their personal responsibility, as compared with those in interpersonal conflicts. Therefore, we make two hypotheses regarding the relationships of account selection and conflict situations: (1) account selection is less influenced by PJR in inter-group conflicts than in interpersonal conflicts; and (2) harm-doers will select more responsibility-rejecting accounts in inter-group conflicts than in interpersonal conflicts.

In order to test the hypotheses, we presented American and Japanese participants with scenarios depicting either interpersonal conflicts or inter-group conflicts (Ohbuchi et al., 2006). Then, we conducted ANOVAs on their account selection and PJR scores using cultural values (HI or HC) and conflict situations (interpersonal or inter-group) as independent variables. Our first prediction on PJR was not supported; that is, the effect of PJR on account selection did not differ

between interpersonal and inter-group situations. Further, the second hypothesis on account selection was also not supported, that is, the main effect of situation was not significant on apology. However, the effect of interaction between cultural value and conflict situation on account selection was significant. Figure 1 indicates that individualists (HI) selected significantly more responsibility-rejecting accounts in interpersonal conflicts than in inter-group ones and the non-significant opposite pattern was seen among collectivists (HC).
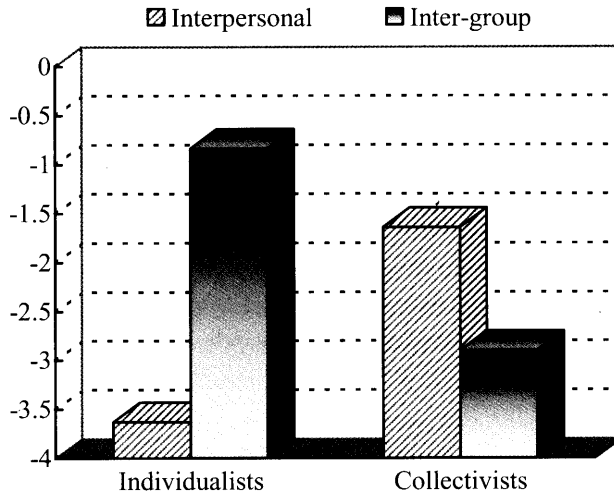

Figure 1. Account selection as a function of cultural value and conflict situation. Higher scores mean responsibility-accepting account and lower scores mean responsibility-rejecting account.

From the motivational perspective of account selection, we can conjecture the reason why individualists preferred responsibility-rejecting accounts in interpersonal conflicts. In such situations, personal responsibility became salient, so we interpret that individualists selected more responsibility-rejecting accounts in order to protect their self-esteem. On the other hand, in inter-group conflict situations, personal responsibility did not become salient, so they were not reluctant to acknowledge responsibility for the harm because their concern for self-esteem was not strongly activated in the group situations.

Collectivists showed a non-significant tendency to select responsibility-rejecting accounts in inter-group conflicts. If collectivists are concerned with collective self-esteem, just as individualists are concerned with personal self-esteem, it seems possible that collectivists are reluctant to acknowledge the collective responsibility in inter-group conflicts. This is a new hypothesis to be examined in the future study.

Conclusion

In this article we examined potential determinants of account selection that plays a crucial role in conflict resolution and discussed several key points based on the past research findings. First, account selection is done on a single dimension that ranges from responsibility acceptance (apology) to rejection (excuse, justification, and denial). Second, it was found that account selection is mainly determined by one's private judgment of responsibility, but it is also influenced by such motivational factors as need for social acceptance and concern for self-esteem. Furthermore, as the past research suggests, collectivists do prefer apology, while individualists relatively prefer responsibility-rejecting accounts such as excuse and justification. However, our recent research has revealed that the effect of cultural values on the account selection process is moderated by the type of conflict situations (interpersonal vs. inter-group) and the type of motivation people hold (i.e., social acceptance vs. protection of self-esteem). Specifically, individualists select responsibility-rejecting accounts in order to protect their personal self-esteem in interpersonal conflicts, but not in inter-group conflicts. On the other hand, an opposite pattern seems to be more likely for the collectivists. More research will be needed to further support this interaction hypothesis.

References

Cody, M., & McLaughlin, M. (1990). Interpersonal accounting. In H. Giles & W. Robinson (Eds), *Handbook of language and social psychology* (pp.227-255). New York: Wiley.

Gelfand, M. J. & Brett, J. M. (2004). *The handbook of negotiation and culture*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gelfand, M. J., Higgins, M., Nishii, L. H., Raver, J. L., Dominguez, A., Murakami, F., Yamaguchi, S., & Toyama, M. (2002). Culture and egocentric perceptions of fairness in conflict and negotiation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, **87**, 833-845.

Gonzales, M. H., Manning, D. J., & Haugen, J. A. (1992). Explaining our sins: Factors influencing offender accounts and anticipated victim response. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **62**, 958-971.

Hamilton, V. L., & Hagiwara, S. (1992). Roles, responsibility, and accounts across cultures. *International Journal of Psychology*, **27**, 157-179.

Holtgraves, T. (1989). The function and form of remedial moves: Reported use, psychological reality and perceived effectiveness. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, **14**, 363-378.

Itoi, R., Ohbuchi, K., & Fukuno, M. (1996). A cross-cultural study of preference of account: Relationship closeness, harm severity, and motives of account making. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **26**, 913-934.

Leung, K. (1987). Some determinants of reactions to procedural models for conflict resolution: A cross-cultural study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **53**, 898-908.

Ohbuchi, K., Fukushima, O., & Fukuno, M. (1995). Reciprocity and cognitive bias in reactions to interpersonal conflicts. *Tohoku Psychologica Folia*, **54**, 53-60.

Ohbuchi, K., Kameda, M., & Agarie, N. (1989). Apology as aggression control: Its role in mediating appraisal of and response to harm. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **56**, 219-227.

Ohbuchi, K., Suzuki, M., & Takaku, S. (2003). Strategicness/authenticity of accounts and instrumental/non-instrumental variables involved: A cross-cultural examination. *Tohoku Psychologica Folia*, **62**, 57-74.

Ohbuchi, K., & Takahashi, Y. (1994). Cultural style of conflict management in Japanese and Americans: Passivity, Covertness, and effectiveness of strategies. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **24**, 1345-1366.

Ohbuchi, K., Takaku, S., & Shirakane, S. (2006). Account selection in inter-group conflict: A cross-cultural consideration. *Tohoku Psychologica Folia*, **65**, 86-94.

Schoenbach, P. (1990). *Account episodes: The management of escalation of conflict*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Takaku, S. (2000). Culture and status as influences on account-giving: A comparison between the U.S.A. and Japan. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, **30**, 371-388.

Takaku, S., Lee, Y., Weiner, B., Ohbuchi, K. (2005). A cross-cultural examination of people's perceptions of apology, responsibility, and justice: From the U.S.S. Greenville accident to the E-P3 airplane accident. *Tohoku Psychologica Folia*, **64**, 1-19.

Takaku, S., Weiner, B., & Ohbuchi, K. (2001). A cross-cultural examination of the effects of apology and perspective taking on forgiveness. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, **20**, 144-166.

Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Triandis, H. C. & Gelfand, M. J. (1998). Converging measurement of horizontal and vertical individualism and collectivism. Journal] *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **74**, 118-128.