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Apologies of the Rich and Famous: Cultural, Cognitive, and Social Explanations of Why We Care and Why We Forgive

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Apologies of the Rich and Famous: Cultural, Cognitive, and Social Explanations of Why We Care and Why We Forgive

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Abstract

In recent years, U.S. and other Western media have inundated the public with celebrity apologies. The public (measured via representative opinion polls) then expresses clear ideas about who deserves forgiveness. Is forgiveness highly individualized or tied to broader social, cultural, and cognitive factors? To answer this question, we analyzed 183 celebrity apologies offered between October 1, 2000, and October 1, 2012. Results are twofold and based in both cultural and social psychological perspectives. First, we found that public forgiveness is systematically tied to discursive characteristics of apologies—particularly sequential structures. Certain sequences appear to cognitively prime the public, creating associative links to established cultural scripts of atonement and rendering some apologies more successful than others. Second, public forgiveness is contingent on broader patterns of social interaction. Like many persuasive messages, successful apologies exist as ordered cultural moments steeped in characteristics of the social relations that bind offenders, victims, and a broader audience of onlookers.

Keywords

apology, cognition, priming, persuasion, celebrity

Indeed, I did have a relationship with Miss Lewinsky that was not appropriate. In fact, it was wrong. It constituted a critical lapse in judgment and a personal failure on my part for which I am solely and completely responsible. . . . I know that my public comments and my silence about this matter gave a false impression. I misled people, including even my wife. I deeply regret that.

—*President William Jefferson Clinton, August 17, 1998*

It has been over fifteen years since the broadcast of President Clinton's apology to the nation. Following sexual indiscretions, a concerted cover-up of those actions, months of investigation, and

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a pending impeachment, Clinton attempted to "stop the bleeding" by delivering a prime time mea culpa on August 17, 1998. The four minutes and sixteen seconds it took to say "I'm sorry" may arguably have been the most pivotal moments in Clinton's political career.[1]

Clinton's apology confirmed what many had feared. Not only had he "sinned," he had lied to conceal that sin. With this admission, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* denounced Clinton's conduct. Once supportive columnists like Clarence Page, Garry Wills, and Lars-Erik Nelson called for Clinton's impeachment, as did editors of more than 70 other newspapers in the United States and abroad (Kurtz 1998).

But the public had different ideas. Results of a CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup Poll taken shortly after the broadcast showed that 51 percent of respondents believed Clinton's apology was adequate; (44 percent disagreed; CNN.com 1998). In a *New York Times*/CBS News Poll (1998) taken less than a month after the broadcast, 67 percent of respondents approved of Clinton's performance—up 7 percent from the days immediately preceding the apology. Polls conducted by Gallup shortly pre- and post apology displayed no significant decrease in the president's popularity ratings (Saad 2012). Indeed, as the scandal grew and impeachment loomed large, Clinton's public approval ratings actually increased in all reliable polls.

Clinton's decision to make public amends proved wise. As Goffman (1967:27) wrote so succinctly, "when face has been threatened, face-work must be done." With his August 17 broadcast, Clinton joined the ranks of celebrities who have successfully used public apology for image restoration (Benoit 1995; Benoit

and Drew 1997), displays of public suffering (Koesten and Rowland 2004; Lazarre 2004), reconciliation and readmittance to a community (Brooks 1999; Lazarre 2004; Tavuchis 1991), the establishment of justice (Banisky 1997; Nobles 2008), conflict management (Cooney and Phillips 2013; Hearit 2006), or the initiation of public dialog (Brooks 1999; Lazarre 2004; Nobles 2008).

While public apologies can be helpful, they do not work for everyone. During the past ten years, many public figures—for example, Joe Biden, Mel Gibson, David Letterman, Dan Rather, Tiger Woods—appeared before the public, begged its pardon, and gained forgiveness. Yet others—for example, Joe Barton, Chris Brown, John Edwards, Don Imus, Akio Toyoda—found their mea culpas met with steely public resistance. In this article, we attempt to explain the factors that underpin successful versus failed attempts, using literatures addressing culture, cognition, and social psychology to guide our efforts.

While there exists much work on high-profile apologies and public forgiveness, such articles typically examine the discursive style of a single apology. Scholars identify specific rhetorical strategies and, using an in-depth case study, itemize those that brought success in specific situations (see e.g., Benoit 1995; Benoit and Drew 1997; Harris, Grainger, and Mullany 2006; Koesten and Rowland 2004; Lee and Chung 2012).[2] To be sure, such findings are critical to understanding public atonement, and we include discursive styles in our analysis. But our goal is to examine a larger number of

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[1] For the full apology, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r4e5Wg4PDI.

[2] Interestingly, work on "everyday" apologies—those occurring between family, friends, colleagues, and so on—is dominated by conversational theorists who study apologies as speech acts. See Garcia (2009), Holmes (1989), Robinson (2004), Scher and Darley (1997), and Suszczynska (1999) for examples of this massive literature.

apologies, thus producing more generalizable findings. Further, we suggest that the analysis of public apologies demands a broader analytic frame than discourse analysis provides. Since such apologies are generally conveyed via mass media, we argue that audience expectations—particularly those linked to media message formats—may be as influential to forgiveness as expectations linked to other discursive techniques. Our analysis pays special attention to one particular formatting convention—the sequencing of media message components. We contend that sequential structure is especially important to forgiveness because certain temporal formats cognitively prime the public to certain expectations—expectations tied to well established cultural scripts of atonement. In this way, variations in sequential structures can render some apologies more successful than others.

While our textual analysis of apologies is driven by cultural and cognitive sociology, our work is also guided by social psychology. We treat apologies as persuasive communication that must be analyzed with reference to identity and relational elements of offenders and recipients (see e.g., Dillard and Shen 2012; Mols 2012; or Simons and Jones 2011). Moreover, we approach public apologies as valid interpersonal exchanges. Like many others, we treat the ties established between celebrities and the public as similarly meaningful to those existing in more intimate relationships (see e.g., Adam and Sizemore 2013; Branch, Wilson, and Agnew 2013; Cerulo 2009, 2011; Cerulo and Ruane 1997, 1998; Chayko 2002; Horton and Wohl 1956; Tian and Hoffner 2010). We argue that public forgiveness is steeped within these connections and, like the acts of mercy bestowed on one's family, friends, or acquaintances, forgiveness is linked to the social profiles of offenders and

victims, their relative status and intimacy, and the nature of the offense.[3]

To explore these ideas, we analyzed 183 of the most visible celebrity apologies delivered between October 1, 2000, and October 1, 2012. Using content analysis of the apologies themselves; publicly accessible data on the offenders, victims, and transgressions; and polling data on public forgiveness, we attempt to better understand the social, cultural, and cognitive factors that explain why the public cares about public apologies and why they forgive.

IT'S HOW YOU SAY IT: CULTURAL AND COGNITIVE ELEMENTS OF FORGIVING

Celebrity apologies are, first and foremost, media events. These statements are typically delivered as press releases, media interviews, or Twitter/Facebook posts, and once issued, they are hyped, widely dispersed, reviewed, and critiqued. To be effective in this context, we contend that the structure of apologies must adhere to cultural norms of mass communication. Successful apologies demand a format that resonates with audience expectations—those surrounding the message patterns that routinely reside in media spaces. Like Schudson (1989:170) and others who study the effectiveness of cultural messages and message frames, we believe the successful

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[3]Unlike research on public apologies, issues of status, relationships, and context are routinely considered by those studying "everyday" apologies. For literature dealing with ethnic variations in apology making and effectiveness, see, for example, Barnlund and Yoshioka (1990), Holmes (1990), Jebahi (2011), Murata (1998), Ogiermann (2009), Shariati and Chamani (2010), Suszczynska (1999), Trosborg (1987). For literature dealing with the offenders' and/or victims' social and personality characteristics, see, for example, Cooney and Phillips (2013), Eaton et al. (2007), Fehr and Gelfand (2010), Holmes (1989), McCullough et al. (1998).

apology must construct "a public and cultural relation among object, tradition, and audience." Without such resonance, the message will be disconnected from the life of the audience and is likely to be ignored or dismissed (see also Benford and Snow 2000; Ferree 2003; LaPoe and Reynolds 2013).

Many have written of the ways in which message content resonates with an audience—particularly with reference to persuasive communication (for good reviews of this massive literature, see e.g., Dillard and Shen 2012; Jamieson and Campbell 2005; Jowett and O'Donnell 2011; Killmeier and Christiansen 2010; Mols 2012; Simons and Jones 2011). Others are now working to better understand the role of message formats in this regard (Altheide 2002, 2006; Cerulo 1988, 1995a, 1995b, 1998; Muschert and Janssen 2013). Especially promising is work on message *sequencing* and its impact on readers' and viewers' response to information. By sequencing, we refer to the temporal ordering of a message's component parts.

Cerulo's (1998) work on media coverage of violence initiated this line of study. Her research identified four informational sequences by which storytellers routinely present such accounts: victim sequences, performer sequences, contextual sequences, and doublecasting sequences. She found that these message sequences were systematically chosen by those crafting accounts of violence, with their choices linked to storytellers' perceptions of audience morality. Storytellers favored victim sequences for accounts of heinous violence, performer sequences for accounts of justifiable violence, and contextual or doublecasting formats for accounts of ambiguous violence. Did storytellers' choices of sequence consistently resonate with audience expectations, thus having the desired effect? Not always. Cerulo's research showed that sequencing's effect on audience reception varied according to the degree of consensus surrounding the "rightness" or "wrongness" of acts. While sequencing greatly influenced evaluations of acts about which there was low moral consensus, it had little impact on the evaluation of acts about which there was high moral consensus.

When it comes to informational sequences, we suggest that violent accounts are not unique. We argue that public apologies will display patterned structures as well and that some sequences will better resonate with those who process them. Apologies, like violent accounts, are stories; they tell of regret for offenses and failures, of intentions and explanations behind actions, and they provide assurances that such actions will not be repeated. As we explore these stories, our task is to identify the various sequential structures presented by the apologies in our sample and explore the impact of different sequences on public forgiveness.

In executing this task, we place special emphasis on the entry and exit points of apology sequences. Building on patterns suggested by Cerulo's work on violence, we argue that the story element by which receivers enter an account will cognitively *prime* receivers. By priming, we refer to a process by which a word, image, or action triggers a certain line of thinking or activates a memory (see e.g., Abelson 1976). Thus, what one says first in a public plea for forgiveness will trigger different associative pathways in the brain and activate different cultural scripts of atonement.

Entry points, while important, only begin a cognitive process; they are not sufficient to fully understanding why the public accepts or rejects apologies. Exit points must be studied as well. If apologies are to succeed, exit points must "fulfill" audience expectations; they must

deliver the correct conclusions to the atonement scripts invoked by one's entry to a story. For example, apologies initiated with reference to victims prioritize the "object" of the offense and the negative impact of the offender's sin. That focus triggers central cultural scripts of compassion and sympathy (see e.g., Cerulo 1998, 2000; Cole 1998; Sandage and Williamson 2005). When someone has been wronged—perhaps someone similar to those reading, hearing, or viewing the statement—we argue that the audience will care little about the elements surrounding the offense, its context, or the characteristics of the offender. Sympathy desires commensuration, not explanation. Thus, those who enter an apology via the victim will be primed for clear statements of restitution or atonement; they will expect this as the apology's logical conclusion. If one's plea ends with a different reference point, forgiveness may be difficult to achieve. In such situations, the mind was primed for a script of atonement—but that script was never completed.

WHO HURTS WHOM: THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF WHY WE CARE

While public apologies are media events, we contend that they are also examples of persuasive messages situated in meaningful interpersonal exchange. Someone has offended, injured, or distressed a person or group. The apology becomes a way of reconciling and repairing important social relations, of convincing an audience to forgive and forget. Knowing this, we argue that gauging an apology's success must go beyond textual analysis. Research must consider the social nature of the exchange, attending to identity and relational factors—factors that prior research reveals can mediate responses to "everyday

apologies"—namely, those exchanged by intimates or acquaintances.[4]

Analyzing public apologies and forgiveness as meaningful social interaction requires that we approach individuals' ties to celebrities as strong and significant social connections, multifaceted bonds that link members of the public to both celebrities as well as to one another. Some have written of such relationships as *parasocial* in nature, characterizing these ties as one-way and illusionary (e.g., Adam and Sizemore 2013; Branch et al. 2013; Horton and Wohl 1956; Tian and Hoffner 2010). But others argue that such connections may actually be something more, viewing ties between celebrities and the public as genuine in their experience and concrete in their impact (Cerulo 2009, 2011; Cerulo and Ruane 1997, 1998; Chayko 2002). We suggest that celebrity-public connections bring members of the public into a space where they can engage a "star," an action or lifestyle and use those encounters in service of community building and self-work.

One element of such community building and self-work involves the establishment of affinity—namely, a sense of familiarity or commonality between social actors, a kinship of spirit comprised of consciousness, sentiment, and action (Vela-McConnell 1999). Building affinity involves self-reflection on the part of the celebrity observer, reflection on the social profile of the celebrity, and the considerations of the celebrity and observer's relative position. Many have documented this process, showing that individuals

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[4]Note 3 reviewed this. Also important are studies addressing how such elements influence other forms of persuasive communication. See, for example, Dillard and Shen (2012), Jamieson and Campbell (2005), Jowett and O'Donnell (2011), Killmeier and Christiansen (2010), Mols (2012), Simons and Jones (2011) for discussions of this large literature.

firmly believe that they know public figures well, and, at some important level, believe that these luminaries are just like them (see e.g., Ferris 2007; Ferris and Harris 2010; Gorin and Dubied 2011). As Gamson (1994:155) presents the publics' views: "With enough money or with clear packaging, with a proper market campaign, anyone can make it," including themselves. Sternheimer (2011:3) makes a similar point, arguing that "celebrity culture seems to provide a continual reaffirmation that upward mobility is possible in America and reinforces the belief that inequality is the result of personal failure rather than systematic social conditions."

Building affinity with the rich and famous is certainly not a new phenomenon. But in recent decades, such affinities have become an exceedingly common feature of social life. We attribute this to the broad connectivity afforded by new communications technologies. Hundreds of TV channels bring us celebrity news 24/7; endless websites feature photos, celebrity quotes, schedules, fan commentary, and explicit strategies by which to connect with celebrities. Via Facebook and Twitter, anyone can follow public figures through their day, perhaps converse with them, and feel involved in the celebrity's social world. Moreover, one can congregate and comment with fellow followers, creating broad interpersonal exchange. In this way, individuals often experience public figures—people whom they never meet face to face—as significant contacts in their social circle.[5]

In addition to affinity, celebrities become potent vehicles for self-work. More than seeking structural equivalence with the rich and famous, many members of the public "shop" celebrities, looking to enhance their identity tool kits (Read 2011). Celebrities become reference points for individuals' desires, and their behaviors become scripts that members of the public can try on or observe, practice with others (especially other admirers), allowing them to affirm or contest social and moral boundaries. Alexander (2010) describes this exercise in vivid terms. As self-work ensues, he writes, celebrities are "taken into the heart and flesh. . . . Worshippers describe this introjection process as if the celebrity-icon actually becomes part of their internal self" (325–26). Then, by externalizing and materializing these feelings, fans complete the process of "becoming." (See also Elliott 2011.)

Public apologies represent a particularly apt moment for the exercise of affinity and self-work. For luminaries, apologies may be highly instrumental, designed to restore one's image, re-establish ties to admirers, and thus ensure continued economic success.[6] But for the public—particularly those who admire public figures—apologies represent something more complex. Apologies are "turning points" in the celebrity's narrative. They present moral dilemmas that focus the public on celebrities' past behaviors, their attempts to reconcile the past with the present, and the ways in which reconciliation (or the lack of it) may influence a celebrity's plans for the future. Members of the public can use these dilemmas to create turning points in their own narratives. Via apologies, members of the public can gather around the sin (one they themselves may have committed) and evaluate sins, consequences, and appropriate reactions and expectations for cleansing and

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[5]Cerulo and Ruane (1998) refer to this connection as "target convergency" and write about its potency.

[6]However, some literature—especially works addressing corporate or medical arenas—suggests that apologies may be too risky for the offender. See, for example, Wohl, Hornsey, and Philpot (2011).

renewal. In this way, public apologies encourage individuals to enter the celebrity's moral dilemma and live it out in accord with their own moral code.

HYPOTHESES

In considering both the textual and interpersonal nature of public apologies and forgiveness, we generate four specific research hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Public apologies will have identifiable discursive styles and sequential structures, with some generating higher levels of forgiveness than others.

Hypothesis 2: Because public apologies are media events, sequencing—a convention of media message formatting—will have a greater impact on public forgiveness than discursive styles.

Hypothesis 3: Public forgiveness will be influenced by many of the same identity and relational factors that impact forgiveness among intimates and acquaintances.

Hypothesis 4: The impact of sequencing stems from connections between object, mind, and culture. Thus, certain textual entry points will prime recipients for particular exits. When these expectations are not met, public forgiveness will be diminished.

METHODS

Sampling

To collect our apologies we utilized two search vehicles: Google and Westlaw Campus Research.[7] In both instances, we entered five search terms—*apology, apologies, apologizes, apologises*, and *sorry*—using the operator "or" to achieve

the most inclusive results. We also specified a time range, searching for apologies on a year-by-year basis, with the total timeframe spanning the period October 1, 2000, to October 1, 2012.

Once identifying the full range of available apologies, we confined our analysis to those that met three key criteria:

1. Since style and format are central to our inquiry, we analyzed only those apologies for which the full text was available.
2. The literature documents significant cultural and linguistic differences in apology styles. We restricted our analysis to English language apologies, attempting to minimize that variation.
3. We focused on statements with the highest public visibility—namely, those covered by five or more distinct media outlets—in order to maximize the chances of finding related public opinion data.

Our strategy resulted in a sample of 183 distinct public apologies.

Independent Variables: Elements of Apology Texts

We coded each apology's *discursive style* and *sequential structure*. For the former, we adopted Benoit's (1995) well tested and reliable typology of image restoration strategies. Benoit identifies five primary strategies: denial, evasion, reduction, corrective action, and mortification.[8] We read each apology in our sample and classified it in one of these categories.[9]

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[7]Westlaw Campus Research is an online service that provides full story text for a comprehensive collection of news and business information, including all major newspapers, magazines, and media transcripts.

[8]Benoit provides subcategories for denial, evasion, and reduction; these subcategories are used by some who adopt his strategy. However, we found the subcategories to be too numerous and nondistinct for the quantitative analysis pursued here.

[9]A second coder, blind to our hypotheses, recoded 15 percent of the apologies and classified their discursive style. Intercoder reliability was 91 percent.

Some examples help to illustrate our coding. When offenders suggest that the wrongdoings in question were misinterpreted, the work of others, or never really occurred, we code the apology as a *denial*. Consider the statement of Oklahoma State Senator Sally Kerns. While speaking on the Senate floor, Kerns said that African Americans and women earn less than white men because they do not work as hard and lack initiative. Kern's apology denies wrongdoing and blames others for misreporting her views:

> I want to humbly apologize for any statements last night about women and African Americans. My words were, obviously, not spoken correctly and for that I humbly apologize. *Unfortunately, when we take "words or sentences" out of the total context of a speech debated on the floor, there can be false misrepresentations* [italics added], but the most important part is to always go to the heart of the matter.

When offenders admit that wrongdoing occurred but fail to take responsibility for the act, we coded the statement as *evasion*. Note singer Chris Brown's apology for destroying the set of *Good Morning America* after an interviewer raised a subject Brown had indicated he would not discuss on air. From Brown's perspective, he was exploited, provoked, and hence, not really culpable:

> First of all, I want to apologize to anybody who was startled in the office, or anybody who was offended or really looked, and [was] disappointed at my actions because I'm disappointed in the way I acted. *I felt like they told us this just so they could get us on the show so they can exploit me* [italics added]. So I took it very, very hard and I really kinda kept my composure throughout the whole interview, although you can see me upset, I kept my composure, I did my

performance. And when I got back *I just let off steam. I didn't physically hurt anyone, I didn't try to hurt anyone, I just wanted to release the anger that I had inside me* [italics added] because I felt that I worked so hard for this music and I felt like people kept just trying to take it away from me.

Some offenders try to minimize the magnitude of their actions; we coded such statements as *reduction*. Consider television comedian Rosie O'Donnell's apology for imitating and ridiculing Asian accents on *The View*. Proclaiming ignorance and using humor, O'Donnell downplays her comments, hoping to reduce the impact of her remarks:

> This apparently was very offensive to a lot of Asian people. So I asked Judy, who's Asian and works here in our hair and makeup department. I said, "Was it offensive to you?" And she said, "Well, kinda. When I was a kid people did tease me by saying ching-chong." *So apparently "ching-chong," unbeknownst to me, is a very offensive way to make fun, quote-unquote, or mock, Asian accents. Some people have told me it's as bad as the n-word. I was like, really? I didn't know that; I never intended to hurt anyone* [italics added], and I'm sorry for those people who felt hurt or were teased on the playground. There's a good chance that I'll do something like that again . . . [but] not on purpose.

When offenders link their remorse to a promise of redress and improved performance, we coded the apology as *corrective action*. Consider NBC's apology to viewers for misrepresenting a 9-1-1 tape integral to George Zimmerman's alleged assault of Trayvon Martin. Beyond regret, NBC explicitly promises better action in the future:

During our investigation it became evident that there was an error made in the production process that we deeply regret. *We will be taking the necessary steps to prevent this from happening in the future* [italics added] and apologize to our viewers.

We classified apologies as *mortification* when offenders unequivocally admit shame and guilt and explicitly ask the public for forgiveness. Olympic runner Marion Jones's apology for steroid use offers a clear example:

> *It is with a great amount of shame that I stand before you and tell you that I have betrayed your trust*. I want all you to know that today *I plead guilty to two counts of making false statements to federal agents*. Making these false statements to federal agents was *an incredibly stupid thing for me to do*, and I am responsible fully for my actions. I have no one to blame but myself for what I have done. To you, my fans, including my young supporters, the United States Track and Field Association, my closest friends, my attorneys, and the most classy family a person could ever hope for—namely my mother, my husband, my children, my brother and his family, my uncle, and the rest of my extended family: I want you to know that *I have been dishonest. And you have the right to be angry with me*. I have let them down. I have let my country down. And I have let myself down. I recognize that by saying that *I'm deeply sorry*, it might not be enough and sufficient to address the pain and the hurt that I have caused you. Therefore, I want to ask for your forgiveness for my actions, and *I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me*. I have asked Almighty God for my forgiveness [italics added].

To code *sequential structure*, we identified the components contained in our sampled apologies: what was done (act), who did it (offender), who was hurt (victim), why the offense occurred (context), the intention behind the act (intent), promises for redress (corrective action), and the actual expressions of regret (remorse). We found these elements combined in ways that formed five distinct apology sequences: victim-driven, offender-driven, action-ownership, context-driven, and doublecasting. We classified each apology in one of these categories.[10]

Again, some examples help to illustrate our coding. *Victim-driven sequences* are informationally sparse, first referencing the victim, then describing the act, and finally referencing intent, context, corrective action, or remorse. Jerry Brown's 2010 apology to Bill Clinton for making a "Monica Lewinsky" joke aptly illustrates the category:

Bill Clinton was an excellent president.	*Victim*
It was wrong for me to joke about an incident from many years ago	*Act*
and I'm sorry.	*Remorse*

Offender-driven sequences prioritize offenders. They are often informationally dense as they can elaborate offenders' characteristics, feelings, or intentions. These sequences do not necessarily mention the victim, and while they may end with remorse or promises for corrective action, they are just as likely to conclude with additional information about the offender or the action's context. Country singer Jason Aldean's 2012 apology to

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[10]A second coder, blind to our hypotheses, recoded 15 percent of the apologies and classified their sequential structure. Intercoder reliability was 93 percent.

fans for his acts of infidelity exemplifies this approach:

Hey Guys—I wanted to talk to you directly, so you were hearing the truth from me and not just reading allegations made about my personal life on gossip web sites.	*Offender (Feelings)*
The truth is that I screwed up.	*Act*
I had too much to drink, let the party get out of hand and acted inappropriately at a bar. I left alone, caught the bus to our next show and that's the end of the story. I ultimately ended up embarrassing my family and myself.	*Context*
I'm not perfect, and	*Offender (Traits)*
I'm sorry for disappointing you guys.	*Remorse*
I really appreciate being able to work through this privately with my family and for all your continued support.	*Offender (Feelings)*

Action-ownership sequences begin by linking offenders and acts, making the two almost inseparable. The sequences do not prioritize the offender's characteristics but rather, the offender's self-castigation. A 2009 apology from Michael Phelps after he was photographed using a bong illustrates this structure:

I engaged in behavior which was regrettable and demonstrated bad judgment. I'm 23 years old and despite the successes I've had in the pool, I acted in a youthful and inappropriate way, not in a manner people have come to expect from me.	*Offender-Act*

For this, I am sorry. I promise my fans and the public it will not happen again.	*Remorse*

Context-driven sequences begin by referencing contingencies. They unfold prior circumstances, interpretations of the situation, or references to active intentions. Consider Mitt Romney's 2012 apology for an alleged incident of physical harassment to which he was a party in high school:

Back in high school, I did some dumb things,	*Context*
and if anybody was hurt by that or offended, obviously I apologize for that.	*Remorse*
I participated in a lot of hijinks and pranks during high school, and some might have gone too far	*Act*
and for that I apologize.	*Remorse*

In *doublecasting sequences*, offenders paint themselves as both victim and sinner, attempting to bring ambiguity to the interpretation of the wrongdoing. Witness Roger Clemens's 2008 apology delivered after violating his marriage vows:

I know that many people want to know what I have to say about the recent articles in the media. Even though these articles contain many false accusations and mistakes, I need to say that	*Victim/ Offender*
I have made mistakes in my personal life	*Act*
for which I am sorry.	*Remorse*
I have apologized to my family and apologize to my fans.	
Like everyone, I have flaws. I have sometimes made choices which have not been right.	*Offender (Traits)*

See Table 1a for category breakdowns.

Table 1. Breakdown of Independent Variables

A: Elements of Apology Texts

	Percentage
Discursive style (Benoit)	
Denial	9
Evasion	27
Reduction	15
Corrective action	17
Mortification	32
Sequential structure	
Victim-driven	21
Offender-driven	21
Action-ownership	29
Context-driven	24
Doublecasting	6

B: Offenders' and Victims' Characteristics

	Offenders' race (percentage)		Victims' race (percentage)
African American	11		13
Asian	3		9
Hispanic	1		1
Native American	0		1
White	85		27
Nondecipherable			49
	Offenders' gender (percentage)		Victims' gender (percentage)
Female	19		23
Male	81		20
Nondecipherable			47
	Offenders' occupations (percentage)		Victims' occupations (percentage)
Athletes	8		10
Blue-collar workers	2		0
Business leaders	13		5
Media broadcasters	13		1
Military figures	3		3

Table 1. (continued)

Politicians	32
Religious officials	8
Scientists	0
Show business	20
Offenders' occupational prestige scores	Victims' occupational prestige scores
$\bar{X} = 59$	$\bar{X} = 60$
M = 60	M = 61
SD = 9	SD = 11
R = 28–73	R = 36–75
Offenders' uber-power status (percentage)	Victim's uber-power status (percentage)
Uber-power	18	6
Other	82	94
Offenders' iconic status (percentage)	Victims' iconic status (percentage)
Iconic	25	10
Non-iconic	75	90

C: Offenders' and Victims' Relational Characteristics

Relative occupational prestige (percentage)	
Offenders more prestigious	66
Victims more prestigious	14
Equal prestige	20
Relative uber-power (percentage)	
Offenders more powerful	17
Victims more powerful	10
Neither powerful	73
Both powerful	1
Relative iconic status (percentage)	
Offenders more iconic	24
Victims more iconic	7
Neither iconic	68
Both iconic	3

(continued)

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Table 1. (continued)

Familiarity (percentage)	
Intimate	11
Acquaintance	23
Stranger	66
Audience scope (percentage)	
One-to-one	45
One-to-many	55
D: Characteristics of the Offense	
Offense (percentage)	
Bigoted or racist actions	21
Poor job performance	21
Personal insults	18
Criminal or violent acts	14
Sexual misconduct	13
Crudeness	5
Political blunders	4
Wartime aggression	3
Form of offense (percentage)	
Action	54
Utterance	46
Visibility of offense (percentage)	
Public	66
Private	34
Taboo offense (percentage)	
Yes	28
No	72
Venue (percentage)	
Press releases	33
Newspapers/magazines	12
TV/radio	43
Facebook or Twitter	13

Independent Variables: Offenders' and Victims' Characteristics

In assessing offenders and victims' characteristics, we recorded a variety of statuses: *race*,[11] *gender, occupation*[12] (all treated as dummy variables in the analysis—see Table 1b for category breakdowns), and *occupational prestige* (using National Opinion Research Center data to garner prestige scores for offenders and victims).[13] We also coded two additional items—offenders' and victims' *uber-power* and *iconicism*.

The construction of uber-power and iconicism requires further explanation. Uber-power refers to a level of dominance enjoyed by a select few celebrities, a position that could be especially key to public opinion. To operationalize both offenders' uber-power and victims' uber-power, we used three lists developed by *Forbes:* (1) The 100 Most Powerful People in the World, (2) The 100 Most Powerful Women in the World, and (3) The 100 Most Powerful Celebrities in the World. These lists, compiled annually, define power with reference to three components: extensive economic resources (measured via personal income for individuals, income and company revenue for business leaders, GDP for national leaders, etc.), continuous public visibility (measured via annual news hits, TV/radio appearances, and social media followers), and broad impact (as calculated by the extent of one's reach across industries/cultures/countries, the numbers of people one affects or controls, and how actively one wields power).[14] We felt it important to record uber-power in the year of the offender's apology. The *Forbes* lists change from year to year,

with people moving on or off. Someone who is dropped or fails to make the list in a given year may indeed be powerful. But the *Forbes* "stamp" captures a level of control and influence that is rare, extreme, and at a given moment (i.e., that of the indiscretion and apology) capable of influencing public forgiveness. In coding the uber-power variable, offenders or victims who appeared on one or more of the *Forbes* lists during the year of their apology were coded as 1 for "uber-powerful"; all others were coded as 0 for "other."

Iconicism captures those who over time have established a "larger than life" presence in their cultural settings—namely, Presidents Bush and Obama; Queen Elizabeth; religious leaders Popes John Paul II, Pope Benedict, and Billy Graham; political figures Hillary Clinton and Jimmy Carter; and popular culture icons Oprah Winfrey, Tiger Woods, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Others in our sample, while visible and familiar to the public, are of a more modest stature—namely, politician Harry Reid, businessman Akio Toyoda, media figure Ed Schultz, or popular culture figure John Meyer. The principle investigators reviewed offenders and victims in the sample and assigned each to iconic (1) or non-iconic (0) status. A second coder, blind to the hypotheses, recoded 15 percent of offenders and victims; intercoder reliability was 90 percent.[15]

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[11]Because our offenders are highly visible, we were able to assign biracial individuals to one of these categories using their own self-characterizations.

[12]Many victims are groups rather than individuals. Therefore, in coding our variables, we had a category denoting "collective" victims.

[13]The occupational prestige scale is a continuous variable that can range from .00 to 1.00; see Davis et al. (1990).

[14]For information on the *Forbes* methodology, see http://www.forbes.com/lists/.

[15]We cross checked the face validity of *offender's iconic status* and *victim's iconic status* using two independent sources. First, we noted which of our icons were included on Gallup's "most admired" list during the year of their apology. One hundred percent of those coded as iconic were on the Gallup list; none of those coded as noniconic were on the list. Second, we consulted the Q ratings of offenders and victims. (Q ratings measure the appeal of public figures among a representative sample of 18- to 70-year-olds in the U.S.). Only a third of our offenders and victims had Q ratings. But within that group, all of those coded as iconic had a rating above 20 percent before and after their apologies. (We chose 20 percent as our cutoff point because that number marks the upper quadrant of the Q rating distribution.) Only one of those coded as a non-iconic garnered that high a rating.

Independent Variables: Offenders' and Victims' Relationship

We recorded the relative occupational prestige, uber-power, and iconicism of individuals in our sample. We also coded the familiarity between offenders and victims and the scope of the apology.

To code *relative occupational prestige*, we subtracted victims' occupational prestige scores from those of offenders and created difference scores. Then using those scores, we created three dummy variables. Difference scores greater than +2 were coded as "offender more prestigious," while those less than –2 were coded as "victim more prestigious." All other scores were coded as "equal prestige." To capture *relative uber-power*, we used the *Forbes*-derived data and created dummy variables indicating whether offenders, victims, both, or neither appeared on one or more of the power lists. For *relative iconic status*, we referred to the data on offenders' and victims' iconicism, creating dummy variables telling us whether offenders only, victims only, both parties, or neither enjoy iconic status.[16] Using information found in the apology or the media coverage surrounding it, we captured the *familiarity* of offenders and victims: intimates, acquaintances, or strangers.[17] Finally, we recorded the *audience scope* of the apology, noting whether the offender's statement was directed to many people

or to one person. (See Table 1c for category breakdowns.)

Independent Variables: The Offense

We coded the offenses described in our sample, indicating the reason why a person sought forgiveness, some characteristics of their "sin," and where the apology occurred. Eight different *offenses* emerged from the data and we created dummy variables reflecting them.[18] Additional dummy variables were also created for the specific *form of the offense* (action or utterance), the *visibility* of the offense (public or private), whether or not offenses were *taboo*,[19] and the media *venue* of the apology. (See Table 1d for coded categories.)

Dependent Variable: Public Forgiveness

The apologies in our sample were widely publicized. Thus, most (173 or 95 percent) were followed by public opinion polls gauging reactions to offenders' statements or to offenders themselves. Using these data, we created a variable called *public forgiveness*.

All of the forgiveness data used in this study were the product of reputable polling agencies using reliable survey techniques to secure representative samples: namely, ABC News, CNN, Fox News,

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[16]Creating measures tapping relative status, uber-power, and iconic status posed one serious problem. Because so many of the victims in our sample were faceless collectives, measures of occupational prestige, uber-power, or iconic status could not be collected. To combat this problem, the primary investigator made a judgment call and coded each victim group relative to the ratings of their offenders. A second coder, blind to our hypotheses, reviewed all ratings. Intercoder reliability was 95 percent.

[17]Press stories on the apology made these relationships clear.

[18]A second coder, blind to our hypotheses, recoded 15 percent of the apology themes. Intercoder reliability was 97 percent.

[19]Examples of taboo offenses included child molestation (or its cover-up), certain racist actions (i.e., using the "N" word in a public setting), and religious defilement (i.e., burning a sacred document). Nontaboo offenses included common or frequently occurring issues—namely, extramarital affairs, drug or alcohol use, verbal insults between political opponents. A second coder, blind to our hypotheses, recoded 15 percent of the offenses in our sample as taboo or nontaboo. Intercoder reliability was 93 percent.

Gallup, *The Guardian, The Los Angeles Times*, NBC/*Wall Street Journal, New York Times*/CBS News, the Quinnipiac Poll, *Time Magazine, Washington Post*, and so on. The questions posed in the polls were not identical. But all questions tapped public reaction to the apology or the respondents' feelings toward the offender immediately after the apology was delivered. Examples of the types of questions used in the polls include: Do you forgive X for (action in question)? Did you think X's apology was sufficient? Do you accept X's apology? Respondents were asked to answer using options such as forgive/cannot forgive/not ready to forgive or yes/no/not sure. We recorded percentages associated with positive responses such as "I forgive" or "yes." This rendered a continuous variable where rates of forgiveness ranged from 0 percent to 93 percent forgiveness ($\bar{X}$ = 35 percent, M = 33 percent, s = 2 percent).[20]

FINDINGS

Who Apologizes, to Whom, for What, and How?

Table 1 list the breakdowns for our independent variables. Here, we describe the basic patterns.

There was considerable variation in how one said "I'm sorry." Table 1a shows that offenders most often selected mortification as their preferred discursive style followed by evasion (27 percent). With reference to sequencing, offenders favored action-ownership sequences (29 percent) followed by context-driven sequences (24 percent).

As Table 1b reveals, public apologies are overwhelmingly a white male phenomenon. This may be because white

males are more likely to occupy social spaces in which highly visible offenses occur; white males also may be more able to command attention for their apologies as they are far more likely than others to be the CEOs, politicians, and religious leaders of the day. Among our offenders, politicians are the largest represented group, followed by show business figures. Our offenders exhibit high occupational prestige scores, but only a minority are uber-powerful or iconic.

The characteristics of victims are a bit more complicated to calculate, for when it comes to public apologies, many are directed toward a broad group with no definitive race, gender, or occupation—namely, fans of a public figure, the gay community, readers/viewers of a particular publication, users of a particular product, victims of sexual abuse, and so on. However, when apologies are delivered to a specific individual or a group with identifiable demographics, the recipients are most often white. The gender of victims is nearly equally distributed, and like offenders, victims are heavily concentrated in politics or show business. Like offenders, victims displayed high occupational prestige scores but are even less likely than offenders to be uber-powerful or iconic (see Table 1b).

Data on relational status show that most offenders have higher prestige scores than the victims of their actions. In most cases, neither offenders nor victims enjoy uber-power or iconic status. The large majority of apologies are directed toward people the offender does not know and are more often delivered to groups rather than an individual (see Table 1c).

Table 1d shows that the most frequent offenses referenced in our sample involved either bigoted/racist actions or poor job performance. A near equal number involved personal insults. As for venue, television/radio apologies were

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[20]No poll respondents forgave Bernie Madoff when he apologized for his financial crimes; 93 percent of poll respondents forgave the Anglican Church when they apologized for initially doubting the veracity of Darwin's theory.

most common. And most apologies addressed something the offender did (as opposed to something they said), something done in public, and something non-taboo in nature.

Public Forgiveness

Our central research question concerns the textual, identity, and relational factors that best predict public forgiveness. We used multiple regression to explore this issue, with public forgiveness serving as the dependent variable.

Phase 1. In the first phase of our analysis, we explored the four variable groups hypothesized to impact public forgiveness. Beginning with the apology style and structure variables, we did separate bivariate regressions, comparing each category of discourse style and each category of sequence type to the N – 1 other categories in their group. We then selected only statistically significant variables (at $p \leq$ .05) for use in Phase 2 of the analysis.

We repeated this method for the variables measuring offender and victim characteristics. For example, we did separate bivariate regressions, using as independent variables each category of offenders' and victims' race, gender, and their occupations. We also did bivariate regressions measuring the impact of offenders' and victims' uber-power status, iconic status, and offenders and victims' occupational prestige scores.

We followed the same process for variables tapping offender-victim relationships and finally for those representing characteristics of the offense. Phase 1 yielded 14 different variables that were significantly associated with public forgiveness: mortification discourse style, victim-driven sequence, offender-driven sequence, context-driven sequence, doublecasting sequence, offender's occupational prestige score, offender more iconic than victim,

victim more iconic than offender, neither offender nor victim iconic, acquaintance-level familiarity, group audience, crime and violence offense, wartime aggression offense, and taboo offense. These variables were used to create a summary regression model designed to examine multivariate predictors of public forgiveness.[21]

Phase 2. We review the summary model findings by linking our results to our four research hypotheses (see Table 2, Model 1).

Hypothesis 1 states that both discursive style and sequential structure will significantly impact levels of public forgiveness. This hypothesis is partially confirmed, as only some of the variables tapping different styles and sequences proved significantly associated with public forgiveness. Specifically, the summary model shows that mortification style is significantly associated with greater forgiveness in comparison to the other discursive styles. Among sequential structures, victim-driven sequences are significantly associated with greater forgiveness in comparison to the other sequential structures while offender-driven sequences are significantly associated with less forgiveness in comparison to the other sequential structures. (Neither context-driven or doublecasting sequences reached statistical significance in the summary model.)

In Hypothesis 2, we argued that apologies are media events. Therefore, sequencing—as a media formatting convention—should be equally or more powerfully associated with public forgiveness than discursive style. When we examine the standardized beta coefficients for style versus sequence, we find support

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[21]Before executing the summary regression model, we checked the appropriate measures of association for all independent variables to avoid issues of multicollinearity. No association proved higher than .33.

Table 2. Regression Analysis—Specifying Predictors of Public Forgiveness

	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	Beta	*B*	Beta
Variables				
Mortification style	.068*	.155*	.069*	.153*
Victim-driven sequence	.126**	.250**		
Offender-driven sequence	−.105*	−.215*		
Context-driven sequence	−.070	−.137		
Doublecasting sequence[a]	−.019	−.020		
Victim-centered atonement			.108*	.213*
Victim-free atonement			−.080*	−.194*
Offender occupation prestige score	.004**	.202**	.004**	.187**
Iconic status				
Offender only	.067*	.141*	.072**	.144**
Victim only	.048	.065	.083	.112
Neither iconic[a]	−.065*	−.151*	−.079*	−.184*
Offender-victim				
Acquaintances	.074*	.149*	.071*	.146*
Audience scope	.082*	.195*	.074*	.178*
Crime and violence theme	−.103*	−.172*	−.097*	−.161*
Wartime aggression	.029	.026	.079	.071
Taboo act	−.033	−.071	−.062	−.134
R^2	.35**		.31**	
F	5.12**		5.17**	
N	173		173	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

for the hypothesis. The impact of victim-driven and offender-driven sequences far outweighs that of mortification. In fact, the effects of these two sequential structures are the most powerful in the model.

Hypothesis 3 addresses the identity and relational nature of public apologies. We argued that public forgiveness would be influenced by many of the same identity, relational, and offense-related variables that impact pleas and pardons among family and friends. Our findings offer partial support for the hypothesis. For example, in research on "everyday" apologies, identity factors such as race, gender, power, and so on influence forgiveness. However, these variables failed to reach statistical significance in Phase 1 of the analysis. More important in this context are elements connected to other aspects

of offenders' and victims' status. For example, offenders' occupational prestige is positively associated with public forgiveness. Similarly, certain aspects of relative iconicism prove important here. When offenders are more iconic than their victims, the condition is significantly associated with greater forgiveness in comparison to the other categories of relative iconicism. When neither offenders nor victims are iconic, the condition is associated with less forgiveness in comparison to other categories of relative iconicism. (Victims' relative iconicism failed to reach statistical significance in the summary model.) Familiarity and audience scope also remain important in the summary model. Apologies made for offending acquaintances are significantly associated with greater forgiveness in

comparison to the other categories of familiarity, and apologies made to groups are significantly associated with greater forgiveness than those made to individuals. Regarding the offense, apologies associated with criminal and violent acts are significantly associated with less forgiveness in comparison to other categories of offense. (The variable representing wartime offenses failed to reach statistical significance in the summary model. The same was true for the variable measuring taboo offenses.) The summary model accounted for 35 percent of the variation in public forgiveness ($R^2 = .35$; $F = 5.12$; $p < .01$).

Finally, we address Hypothesis 4. We argue that the impact of sequencing is tied to the temporal ordering of text, its ability to cognitively prime recipients, and the cultural scripts that such priming evokes. In this regard, the pairing of certain textual entry and exit points becomes important, for we argue that certain entry points beckon specific exits. Testing this hypothesis required some recoding of our data. We began by considering the seven elements of apologies (victim, offender, offense, context, intention, corrective action, and remorse), and we recorded the elements that served as the entry point and exit point for each apology. Thirty different entry-exit configurations are found in our data, but eight of those configurations accounted for two-thirds of all apology structures. Table 3 lists these configurations according to their rate of appearance.

We created two dummy variables designed to capture the differences between the most frequently used entry-exit sequences. The first variable, *victim-centered atonement*, taps circumstances in which victim entry points are combined with exit points that (a) further emphasize the victim, (b) promise corrective action, or (c) express remorse. The second variable, *victim-free atonement*,

Table 3. The Eight Most Common Entry-Exit Configurations

A: By Frequency of Occurrence

Entry Point	Exit Point	Frequency
Actor	Remorse	18
Victim	Remorse	17
Act	Remorse	16
Context	Remorse	15
Victim	Corrective action	13
Actor	Corrective action	13
Act	Corrective action	9
Victim	Victim	8

B: As Recoded

Entry Point	Exit Point	Frequency
Victim-Centered Atonement		
Victim	Remorse	17
Victim	Corrective action	13
Victim	Victim	8
Victim-Free Atonement		
Actor	Remorse	18
Act	Remorse	16
Context	Remorse	15
Actor	Corrective action	13
Act	Corrective action	9

pairs offender, offense, or context entry points with exit points that (a) promise corrective action or (b) express remorse (see Table 3b). When we substitute these new entry-exit variables for the sequences entered in Model 1, we find that the victim-centered atonement sequences are significantly associated with greater forgiveness in comparison to the other categories of entry-exit sequences. In contrast, victim-free atonement is significantly associated with less forgiveness in comparison to the other categories of entry-exit sequences (see Table 2, Model 2). These findings raise two important points. First, victim entry, in and of itself, is not sufficient to gain forgiveness. Victim entry points must be accompanied by a "final word" that continues to center the victim or that promises some

explicit expression of atonement. Further, initiating one's apology with a focus on the offender, the context, or any mitigating circumstances overshadows expressions of remorse restitution. Being sorry is simply not enough when one prioritizes self or circumstance over the injured party. Rather, remorse is recognized only when it flows from acknowledgement of victims ($R^2 = .31$; $F = 5.17$; $p < .01$).

Further Considering the Culture and Cognition of Public Forgiveness

We hypothesized that the first thing one says in seeking forgiveness primes receivers for particular conclusions. If such conclusions are lacking, the apology may prove ineffective. Our second regression model offers some support for that hypothesis. Other breakdowns in our data support this as well. For example, the mean forgiveness rate for victim-centered atonement apologies is 50 percent, whereas all other victim-entry configurations—those with exit points of intention, context, and so on—enjoy a mean forgiveness rate of only 38 percent ($t = 1.73$; $p < .05$).

Of course, the forgiveness rates cited here are derived from polling data. Thus, we cannot track the deliberative pathways by which forgiveness unfolded in respondents' minds. Lacking such data, one way to probe the cognitive logic behind public forgiveness of the apologies in our sample rests in Internet posts that directly consider these apologies. These posts are by no means representative, and we use them strictly in an exploratory manner. Yet, they provide us with some useful information on the self-reported elements that enter into individuals' decisions to bestow or withhold forgiveness.

Consider, for example, the case of Australia's "Stolen Generation" (i.e., children of Australia's indigenous groups removed from their families by Australian government and church agencies). On February 13, 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued a public apology for the action. The statement began with the following text—a clear specification of victims:

> Today we honor the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history. We reflect on their past mistreatment. We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations—this blemished chapter in our national history . . .

The apology ended with a statement of remorse and corrective action:

> We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians. A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again. A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve, and mutual responsibility.

Bloggers on Creative Spirits, a site devoted to discussions of Aboriginal culture, displays numerous reactions to Rudd's apology. Most directly mention Rudd's first and last words. These comments center victims, express expectations for redress and remorse, and convey a sense that Rudd's apology properly satisfied those expectations. For example:

> To me, our Prime Minister's apology is saying to my granny and the thousands like her, their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren [victims], that we understand your pain and we acknowledge this long-ignored chapter in our history [remorse].
>
> *Che Cockatoo-Collins, head of the Indigenous Sports Academy, Port Adelaide*

Or another:

> Now I believe that the colour bar which I intuitively feel still operates and works against us [victims], will start to fade away [corrective action].
>
> *Deborah Ruiz Wall of Filipino-Australian descent, Newtown*[22]

Compare these sentiments with reactions to an apology issued by GOP official Marilyn Davenport on April 18, 2011. Davenport was discovered emailing to friends a highly offensive cartoon of President Obama—one that depicted him as a chimpanzee. Davenport's apology utilizes a victim-entry point:

> To my fellow Americans and to everyone else who has seen this email I forwarded and was offended by my action . . . [victim]

But rather than ending with corrective action or remorse, she continues by referencing her intentions:

> I humbly apologize and ask for your forgiveness of my unwise behavior. I say unwise because at the time I received and forwarded the email, I didn't stop to think about the historic implications and other examples of how this could be offensive [intentions].

Bloggers discussing this matter on the Huffington Post website are dissatisfied with the statement. Davenport deviates from the script to which receivers were primed, and some attempt to correctly complete the script for Davenport—to instruct her on "the rules" of acceptable atonement:

> How spectacularly clueless can an "imperfect Christian lady" be? If she

is as she claims she needs to go away and reflect on the profoundly injurious nature of depicting an African-American as a chimpanzee. *Forgiveness requires a meaningful apology not this "I would never do what I did" type of nonsense* [italics added].
>
> *T-Rex 86*

Or another:

> Interesting apology. She says that her behavior was "unwise," that she hadn't thought of the "historic implications," that she didn't realize her message could be "offensive" *Not a word of recognition that what she did was wrong—morally, spiritually, religiously, humanly wrong* [italics added].
>
> *downwithbs*[23]

We noticed the same pattern in examining reactions to a second pair of victim-entry apologies. On November 14, 2009, Oprah Winfrey apologized to actress Robin Givens, expressing sorrow for allowing Givens's ex-husband, Mike Tyson, to speak about abusing Givens in joking tones. Oprah begins the apology by saying:

> I would say to you and to every woman who's ever been hit . . . [victims]

She continues:

> I feel that I did not handle that as well as I should have. And I feel that I could have gone further and should have said more to clarify that what he was doing and what he was saying was wrong. So I apologize to you and to every woman who has ever been in that situation [remorse].

The apology—initiated by a reference to the victim and concluded with an

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[22]For additional posts, see http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/politics/sorry-apology-to-stolen-generations.

[23]For additional posts, see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/19/marilyn-davenport-califor_n_850992.html.

expression of remorse—leaves bloggers satisfied that expectations have been fulfilled. The victim has been centralized—from beginning to end:

> I commend you on the respect you showed Robin [victim], by apologizing and allowing her to "air" her hurt. I have been in her situation, be it 15 years ago, I felt her hurt and I too accept your apology [remorse].
>
> *Tgrimsey*

Another writes:

> Thank you so much for bringing back Robin [victim] and for your apology to all of us. I was very upset by the Tyson interview. You have my respect for admitting that you were just not quick enough to respond to him in a better way. We all make mistakes and you are to be respected for admitting your shortcoming [remorse].
>
> *ellenwaite*[24]

Contrast these sentiments with those expressed toward LeBron James when on May 11, 2011, he apologized to Cleveland fans for relocating to Miami. The apology begins with reference to victims:

> I knew deep down in my heart, as much as I loved my teammates back in Cleveland and as much as I loved home . . . [victims]

However, the apology ends with considerations of James's needs:

> I knew I couldn't do it by myself . . . I apologize for the way it happened. But I knew this opportunity was once in a lifetime [intentions/needs].

Readers are primed for corrective action or remorse—but they do not get it.

Instead, the offender leads readers to his own intentions and desires. As a result, bloggers feel less than satisfied with the statement and comment on its "unfinished" nature:

> I don't blame LeBron for leaving. That's his choice. But to act like the Cavs didn't try to put the right people in place to win titles is absurd and misinformed. How's your foot taste, because you certainly stuck it in your mouth.
>
> *jcustunner*

And another:

> No matter what happens, the world will remember Lebron as an arrogant dickhead. At least there is that.
>
> *foudwimmertail*[25]

To be sure, these data are anecdotal. In-depth analysis is required before we can definitively link sequencing, priming, resonance, and public forgiveness. Yet, this initial excursion suggests important connections that deserve further attention.

CONCLUSION

In their bestseller, *My Bad*, Slanasky and Sorkin (2006:2) describe public apologies as nothing more than "wrongdoers rushing forward to get their repentance on record," with the public all too willing to grant celebrities "speedy pardons." Our findings suggest a very different picture. We show that public forgiveness is rarely automatic. Rather, it is linked to specific aspects of media message design and to certain identity and relational connections of offenders and victims. These findings add something new to public apology research. By exploring a wide range of

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[24]For additional posts, see http://www.oprah.com/relationships/Robin-Givens-Responds-to-Mike-Tyson/2.

[25]For additional postings, see http://probasketballtalk.nbcsports.com/2011/05/12/lebron-james-apologizes-for-%E2%80%9Cthe-decision%E2%80%9D/.

statements rather than relying on single case analyses, we identify a variety of sociocultural factors that influence forgiveness across different situations.

The impact of message design tells us something important about the culture and cognition of apologies. *How* one organizes a plea for pardon—for example, the sequencing of apology elements—is as important to forgiveness as *what* one says. This finding expands on earlier research linking story sequencing to moral evaluations of violence; here, we see that sequencing impacts assessments of other actions as well. Moreover, the findings on sequencing suggest fruitful research paths linking cognitive priming, the resonance of cultural scripts, and our understanding of evaluation and absolution. In this study, we paid special attention to apology entry points, arguing that first words beckon cultural scripts that prime recipients for specific concluding remarks; we also suggested that breaks with such expectations—namely, unanticipated exit points—damage apology effectiveness. Our primary data allowed for only an initial test of this hypothesis. Thus, we collected exploratory data from blog posts connected to apologies in our sample. We found such postings highly suggestive of the priming process we describe.

Of course, our findings are strictly preliminary. Further research is needed. Thus, using interviews and focus groups, we plan to explore how subjects react to "contemporary" public apologies and examine how they explain the factors that come to play in their forgiveness decisions. These type of data will allow us to probe people's reasoning as it unfolds and more directly address the complex interaction of culture and cognition in the process of forgiveness. Such a design also will bring into play another important piece of the public forgiveness puzzle; namely, the characteristics of those evaluating the apology. While polling data allow us to gauge who forgives and under what conditions, we cannot use it to gauge the impact of evaluators' social profiles. Are similarities in offenders and evaluators' social profiles critical to apology success? How powerful are evaluators' perceived affinities in forgiveness decisions? By what mechanics does self-work influence evaluators' propensity for pardon? These factors represent critical additions not only to our understanding of public forgiveness, but to any context in which one uses media to target audiences for judgments of right and wrong.

Focus group and interview data will also help us better understand the social psychology of apologies. In our data, identity and relational elements matter to public forgiveness. But the impact of these factors is secondary to textual elements. Moreover, the identity and relational factors involved in public forgiveness seem much more limited than those found in studies of everyday apologies. In our work, offenders' and victims' race, gender, power, and the nature of offenses were not significantly related to levels of public forgiveness. However, in concert with studies of everyday apologies, certain dimensions of status (i.e., occupational prestige and iconicism) and the nature of ties between offenders and victims (i.e., acquaintanceship) were important predictors of public forgiveness levels. This finding may shed light on the situations and contexts in which the public develops affinity with the offender. The public may best relate to the "commonness" of transgressions against weak ties. Such offenses lack the specificity and, in some cases, the deep emotion involved in hurting an intimate. Thus, evaluators may find these offenses familiar; they may seem less complicated, more generalizable, and thus easier to evaluate.

In a related vein, we wonder if the experience of acquaintanceship versus intimacy or detachment may be important to understanding celebrity-audience ties. Acquaintanceship may define the social context in which these relationships come to feel more "real" than "parasocial." Focus group and interview data will allow us to further probe this issue.

On both of these counts—message design and the relational patterns of forgiveness—our findings and the questions they forge stand at the intersection of culture, cognition, and social psychology. All are needed to inform satisfying conclusions. The format of cultural objects, their potential for cultural resonance, and the relational elements in which evaluations are situated are all integral parts of why we care and why we forgive.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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