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An Empirical Note on Perceptions of Partial Apologies

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Abstract

This study examined perceptions of partial apologies. Eighty young people rated the extent to which five components of apology (i.e., accepting responsibility, acknowledging harm, expressing remorse, offering reparation, and promising forbearance) implied each other. Statistical analyses across different types of partial apologies showed no significant differences in the extent to which a particular uncommunicated component of apology was implied by one type of partial apology than another. Analyses within each type of partial apology revealed significant differences in the extent to which a partial apology implied one type of uncommunicated component than another: Acknowledging harm or offering reparation implied promising forbearance to a lesser extent than accepting responsibility and expressing remorse. Expressing remorse or promising forbearance implied accepting responsibility to a greater extent than acknowledging harm and offering reparation. It is important to understand perceptions of partial apologies because they are more prevalent than full apologies, and may be considered less effective.

Keywords: Apology, Victim-offender Mediation, Restorative Justice, Remorse

An Empirical Note on the Components of Apology

The offer of an apology is a remedial action that ultimately aims to resolve conflict and re-establish social harmony. Apologies may be public or private and offered by collectives or individuals (e.g., Fuchs-Burnett 2002, Govier and Verwoerd 2002, Alberstein, *et al.* 2007). Although apologies may be used in (criminal and civil) legal settings, they tend to be more common in alternative dispute resolution (e.g., Levi 1997, Tyler 1997, Taft 2000, Latif 2001, O'Hara and Yarn 2002, Petrucci 2002, Allan 2008). Here, conflicting parties are brought together voluntarily to engage in a dialogue during which they can negotiate a mutually agreeable resolution. This provides one (or both) parties an opportunity to apologize in addition to offering compensation or reparation. In fact, in the criminal justice context, apology is considered a key mechanism by which victim-offender mediation, a form of restorative justice, operates (e.g., Sherman *et al.* 2005, Shapland *et al.* 2007, Blecher 2011, Dhimi 2012, 2015, see also Poulson 2003).

Past research, primarily in social psychology, has found that an apology may have numerous beneficial effects on the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of those receiving it (or even simply observing it). For instance, the offer of an apology can improve perceptions of the apologizer and wrongful act (e.g., Ohbuchi, Kameda, and Agarie 1989, Scher and Darley 1997, Gold and Weiner 2000, Bornstein, Rung, and Miller 2002, Hodgkins and Liebeskind 2003, Robbennolt 2003, Risen and Gilovich 2007). An apology can also enhance perceptions of the prospect of conflicting parties reconciling (e.g., Scher and Darley 1997, Hodgins and Liebeskind 2003, Robbennolt 2003, Tomlinson, Dineen, and Lewicki 2004, Risen and Gilovich 2007). Apologies can affect the receiver's positive and negative emotions (e.g., Ohbuchi *et al.* 1989, Bennett and Earwaker 1994, Fukuno and Ohbuchi 1998, Robbennolt 2003), and advance the healing process (e.g., Ohbuchi *et al.* 1989, Robbennolt 2003), as well as increase satisfaction with mediation practices (e.g., Dhimi 2012). Finally, from a

behavioral standpoint, the offer of an apology can reduce the desire to punish the offender (e.g., Ohbuchi *et al.* 1989, McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal 1998, Gold and Weiner 2000, Bornstein *et al.* 2002, Hodgins and Liebeskind 2003, Skarlicki, Folger, and Gee 2004, Risen and Gilovich 2007, Wooten 2009). An apology can also increase the receiver's desire to accept a settlement (e.g., Robbennolt 2003, Skarlicki *et al.* 2004).

But, what constitutes an apology? And, what does an apology mean?

Beyond, the simple ‘‘I’m sorry’’, apologies may be full (also called sincere or genuine) or partial. Legal and sociological commentators have attempted to delineate the facets of a full apology. For instance, it is argued that an apology is an expression of regret or remorse (Tavuchis 1991) as well as an admission of wrongdoing, acceptance of responsibility for the wrongful act, and offer of compensation or reparation (Taft 2006). According to Goffman (1971, p.113), ‘‘In its fullest form, the apology has several elements: expression of embarrassment and chagrin; clarification that one knows what conduct has been expected and sympathizes with the application of negative sanction; verbal rejection, repudiation, and disavowal of the wrong way of behaving along with vilification of the self that so behaved; espousal of the right way and an avowal henceforth to pursue that course; performance of penance and the volunteering of restitution.’’

Social psychologists and those conducting empirical legal studies who have explored the nature of apology from an empirical stance, suggest that a full apology generally involves five components (e.g., Schlenker and Darby 1981, Scher and Darley 1997, Landman 2001, Robbennolt 2003, Schmitt, *et al.* 2004, Risen and Gilovich 2007, Choi and Severson 2009, Fehr and Gelfand 2010, Pace, Feduik, and Botero 2010, Slocum, Allan and Allan 2011, Dhimi 2012). These are: (1) an acceptance of responsibility for the wrongful behavior and harmful outcomes; (2) an acknowledgement of the harm done and that it was wrong; (3) an expression of regret or remorse for the harm done; (4) an offer to repair the harm done or

make amends; and (5) a promise not to repeat the behavior in the future (i.e., forbearance) and to work towards good relations.

Full apologies are not, however, particularly common. Meier (1992 cited in Meier 1998) found that a simple 'sorry' was one of the most common strategies used by people when apologizing, followed by partial apologies that focused on acknowledgment of harm, offer of reparation and promise of forbearance. Even in the context of victim-offender mediation, partial apologies are more likely than full apologies. For instance, it can be inferred from Blecher's (2011) commentary on previous research on victim-offender mediation cases involving juveniles, in Australia, that an apology was offered in around two-thirds of cases. These were not necessarily full apologies, and the acceptance of responsibility was more common than the expression of regret and promise of forbearance. Dhimi (2012) analysed the records of cases that had undergone mediation in one of the oldest mediation centres in Europe, and the longest running in the UK. It was revealed that a full apology containing all five components was offered in only 17% of cases. Apologies containing one component occurred in 42% of cases. In 15% of cases, the apology contained two components and in another 15% the apology contained three components. Four components were present in apologies in 6% of cases. Across all cases, the acknowledgement of harm was the most prevalent component of apology, while the promise of forbearance was the least common. The acceptance of responsibility, expression of remorse and offer of reparation were fairly equally common.

There is a small body of research suggesting that some of the components of apology may be interlinked. Using a variety of methods, these studies show that an expression of one component of apology (i.e., a partial apology) may imply communication of another component. For instance, in the aforementioned study, Dhimi (2012) observed that in 30% of cases a simple "I'm sorry" was also stated in addition to one or more specific components of

apology. Non-parametric statistical tests revealed that saying “I’m sorry” was associated with each of the following components: the admission of wrongdoing, expression of remorse, promise of forbearance and offer of reparation. Saying “I’m sorry”, however, was not associated with the acknowledgment of harm. In a linguistic analysis of native and non-native English speakers’ apology strategies, Trosborg (1987) observed that the acceptance of responsibility was related to the acknowledgment of harm.

Several studies have involved the use of experimental methods where the effect of partial apologies are studied by the offer (or not) of one or more components of apology. Scher and Darley (1997) manipulated four components of apologies (i.e., the acceptance of responsibility, expression of remorse, offer of reparation and promise of forbearance). It was found that remorse was assumed when offenders accepted responsibility, offered reparation, and promised forbearance. Schmitt *et al.* (2004) manipulated four components of apology (i.e., accepting responsibility, acknowledging harm, expressing remorse and offering reparation). They found that when reparation was offered, it was also believed to imply the acceptance of responsibility, acknowledgment of harm, and expression of remorse. Gold and Weiner’s (2000) research included a manipulation of the expression of remorse. They demonstrated that this was indirectly related to perceptions of forbearance. Robbennholt’s (2003) experimental research manipulated the acceptance of responsibility and showed that this implied the expression of regret and the promise of forbearance. Finally, Risen and Gilovich (2007, Experiment 2) found that the expression of remorse was implied by a vague acceptance of responsibility.

The Present Study

While the aforementioned studies provide a combination of indirect and direct evidence for the association between different components of apology using a variety of

methods, to-date, no study has systematically examined the association between each of the five specific components of apology. The present study directly addressed two questions: (1) Is an uncommunicated component of apology implied to a greater extent by one type of partial apology than by another type of partial apology? For instance, is the expression of remorse implied to a greater extent by a partial apology comprising an acceptance of responsibility than by a partial apology comprising the acknowledgment of harm? (2) Does a partial apology imply one type of uncommunicated component of apology to a greater extent than another type of uncommunicated component of apology? For instance, does a partial apology comprising an acknowledgement of harm imply the expression of remorse to a greater extent than the promise of forbearance?

It is important to understand how people may perceive partial apologies since these are more prevalent than full apologies (e.g., Dhimi 2012). The need to better understand the meaning of a partial apology is also underscored by concerns that some have about the potential ineffectiveness of such apologies (e.g., Taft 2000, Latif 2001). The present study, therefore, aims to address gaps in the literature.

Method

Participants

A total of eighty young people volunteered to participate in the present study.¹ Fifty-one percent were male. The average age of the sample was 19.88 ($SD = 3.54$). Seventy-eight percent described themselves as White, and the rest were from visible minority groups. The highest level of education completed by 26.25% of the sample was up to age 16; 55.00% had done some college/university, and 10.00% had a degree level or professional qualification. Forty-four percent of the sample were unemployed, 32.50% were employed (on either full- or part-time basis), and 20.00% were students. Fifty-eight percent of the sample said they had

¹ A statistical power calculation suggested that a sample size of 16 in each of the five groups (i.e., a total sample of 80) would be sufficient to detect an effect, using a repeated measures ANOVA with four measures from one group and an alpha level of .05.

been a victim of crime, and 38.75% said they had been convicted of a crime. Finally, 42.50% of participants said they were aware of victim-offender mediation.

Design

A between-subjects experimental design was used to manipulate the communication of a partial apology. There were five types of partial apology as follows: acceptance of responsibility, acknowledgment of harm, expression of remorse, offer of reparation, and promise of forbearance.

Stimuli and Measures

Participants responded to one of the five types of partial apology. These were presented as question stems that were followed by four items, each of which required a rating response. The question stems were all in the same format and varied only with regard to the type of partial apology offered i.e., “When someone apologizes, and [admits that they’ve done something wrong/ acknowledges the harm that they have caused/ feels bad for what they have done/ offers to help make things better/ promises not to do it again], to what extent do you think they also...”

The four items that followed referred to the remaining components of apology which were not included in the preceding question stem. For instance, if the question stem included the following partial apology “admits that they’ve done something wrong”, then the four items were the following components of apology: “acknowledge the harm that they caused”, “feel bad for what they have done”, “offer to help make things better”, and “promise not to do it again”.

Responses to each item were provided on a 9-point rating scale, anchored at each end from 1= “not at all” to 9 = “completely.”

Procedure

Data were collected by a trained research assistant and the author. In order to attract a diverse sample, participants were recruited from a YMCA and dance club located in a UK city. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Data were collected from participants individually at the venue where they were recruited. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the five question stems. The order of the items following the question stem was randomized. The experiment took participants approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Analyses and Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of participants' responses to the questions asking about the extent to which each type of partial apology also implied the four other components of apology. The analyses and results are presented below in relation to each of the two aims of the study.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Is an Uncommunicated Component of Apology Implied More by One Type of Partial Apology than Another?

One-way ANOVAs were computed to answer this question. Type of partial apology was the between-subjects factor with five levels, and ratings of the extent to which this implied the four uncommunicated components of apology were the dependent measures. These analyses indicated that there were no significant differences in the extent to which each uncommunicated component of apology was implied by each type of partial apology (for a partial apology comprising acceptance of responsibility: $F[3, 63] = 0.27, p = .848$, for acknowledgement of harm: $F[3, 63] = 1.62, p = .194$, for expression of remorse: $F[3, 63] = 2.32, p = .085$, for offer of reparation: $F[3,63] = 1.15, p = .336$, and for promise of forbearance: $F[3,63] = 1.06, p = .371$).

Does a Partial Apology Imply One Type of Uncommunicated Component of Apology More than Another?

Two sets of analyses were conducted to answer this question. First, repeated measures ANOVAs were computed for each type of partial apology. The dependent measures referred to the four uncommunicated components of apology. The second set of analyses were post hoc tests (i.e., pairwise t -tests) that were used to explore any statistically significant effects. These tests compared mean differences in the extent to which pairs of uncommunicated components of apology were implied by a type of partial apology.

It was found that there was a statistically significant effect of a partial apology when it comprised: acknowledgement of harm ($F [3, 45] = 4.06, p = .012, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .21$), expression of remorse ($F [3, 45] = 3.15, p = .034, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .17$), offer of reparation ($F [3, 52] = 4.85, p = .005, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .24$), and promise of forbearance, $F (3, 45) = 5.12, p = .004, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .25$. There was no statistically significant effect of a partial apology comprising acceptance of responsibility, $F (3, 45) = 0.63, p = .597, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$.

The posthoc tests revealed that when a partial apology involved an acknowledgment of harm, the extent to which it implied promising forbearance was significantly less than the extent to which it implied accepting responsibility ($t[15] = 2.94, p = .010$, see Table 1) or showing remorse, ($t[15] = 2.58, p = .021$, see Table 1). There were no other statistically significant differences in the extent to which a partial apology involving an acknowledgment of harm implied other components of apology compared to each other, $ps > .05$.

A partial apology involving an expression of remorse implied accepting responsibility to a significantly greater extent than either acknowledging harm ($t[15] = 3.78, p = .002$, see Table 1) or offering reparation ($t[15] = 4.24, p = .001$, see Table 1). There were no other significant differences, $ps > .05$.

As Table 1 shows, when a partial apology involved an offer of reparation, it implied promising forbearance to a significantly less extent than accepting responsibility ($t[15] =$

2.77, $p = .014$), acknowledging harm ($t[15] = 2.99, p = .001$), or showing remorse, $t(15) = 3.17, p = .006$. No other significant differences were observed, $ps > .05$.

Finally, as Table 1 shows, a partial apology involving a promise of forbearance implied accepting responsibility to a significantly greater extent than acknowledging harm ($t[15] = 2.27, p = .039$), showing remorse ($t[15] = 3.87, p = .002$), and offering reparation, $t(15) = 2.83, p = .013$. There were no other significant differences, $ps > .05$.

Discussion

Apologies can be powerful tools in conflict resolution (e.g., Robbennolt 2003, Skarlicki *et al.* 2004). Full, genuine or sincere apologies comprise several components. However, the fact that full apologies are not as common as partial ones (see e.g., Dhami 2012, 2015) suggests that we need to better understand how people perceive partial apologies. In particular, do people associate specific components of an apology that are communicated with other components which are not explicitly stated? In other words, is there an implicit association among specific components of apology in people's minds?

The present study examined how specific components of an apology that constitute a partial apology may imply other components which have not been explicitly communicated. In doing so, the present study also attempted to overcome some of the limitations of past research on apology. In particular, the small body of social psychological research employing experimental designs to study apology has not examined all five components of apology in one study, and has not examined the relations among all of these components, as is done in the present study. Several findings emerged from the present study. Although it is difficult to directly compare the present study with past studies due to differences in focus, methods and analyses, the present findings are broadly consistent with past findings (Trosborg 1987, Scher and Darley 1997, Gold and Weiner 2000, Robbennolt 2003, Schmitt *et al.* 2004).

When comparing across types of partial apology (i.e., those where the apologizer accepts responsibility, acknowledges harm, expresses remorse, offers reparation, and promises forbearance), the present study revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in the extent to which uncommunicated components of apology were implied by different types of partial apology. This idea is compatible with evidence showing no significant association between the acceptance of an apology and its fullness measured in terms of the number of components present (Dhami 2012). A partial apology may not necessarily lack the power to stimulate a meaningful resolution between conflicting parties, as is often the concern (Taft 2000, Latif 2001) because a partial apology may not be perceived as such.

When examining each type of partial apology separately, the present study found that a partial apology comprising the acceptance of responsibility implied the uncommunicated components of apology (i.e., acknowledgement of harm, expression of remorse, offer of reparation, and promise of forbearance) to the same extent. By contrast, the other four types of partial apology implied the uncommunicated components to significantly different extents. It was found that the acceptance of responsibility was more implied a greater extent than some of the other uncommunicated components of apology when the partial apology comprised the acknowledgment of harm, the expression of remorse, the offer of reparation and the promise of forbearance. This suggests that a partial apology may be equivalent to the acceptance of responsibility.

It was also found that a partial apology involving either an acknowledgment of harm or offer of reparation implied the promise of forbearance to a lesser extent than some other components i.e., the acceptance of responsibility and expression of remorse. It could be argued that the promise of forbearance may be less likely to contribute to the effectiveness of victim-offender mediation or restorative justice practices for two reasons. One reason is that

this component of apology is less commonly communicated than other components such as the acknowledgment of harm or acceptance of responsibility (Blecher 2011, Dhami 2012). The other reason is that the promise of forbearance is less likely to be implicit in these other more commonly communicated components of apology.

In addition, a partial apology involving the expression of remorse or promise of forbearance implied the acceptance of responsibility to a greater extent than some other components i.e., the acknowledgment of harm and offer of reparation. This supports the concern that some in the legal profession have about offenders or plaintiffs expressing remorse because it may be used as an acceptance of responsibility (e.g., Tyler 1997).

The present findings have potential implications for the development of models of apology that attempt to delineate the relationship between specific components of apology and the meaning being communicated. For instance, according to Slocum *et al.* (2011) the components of apology correspond to one or more of three distinct responses, namely affect, affirmation and action, that each reflect a degree of the apologizer's focus on the self-versus other. Expressing regret and remorse are considered to be affective responses that focus on the self and other, respectively (see also Allan 2008). The acceptance of responsibility and acknowledgement of harm are claimed to be both affirmative reactions that focus on the self and other, respectively. Finally, it is stated that the offer of reparation refers to an action that focuses on the other. The present findings suggest that by conceptualizing apology in terms of the components that are explicitly communicated and excluding the implicit associations among them and the unstated components, models of apology may oversimplify the meaning people attach to apologies. In addition, attempts to de-confound (at least some) components of apology also renders models of apology potentially unrepresentative of how people think about apology i.e., lacking in external validity (Dhami, Hertwig, and Hoffrage 2004).

Strengths, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Some past apology researchers have preferred to use naturalistic data (see Meier 1998). However, such data do not enable systematic investigation of the components of apology in the manner that the experimental method used in the present study does. The present method, nevertheless, has potential limitations. One is the way in which partial apology was operationalized. It could be argued that saying that an offender 'feels bad for what they have done' might refer to feelings of regret or even shame rather than remorse. Similarly, saying that an offender 'admits that they've done something wrong' may not necessarily refer to taking responsibility. The fact is that there is no consensus among the research community on how specific components of apology should be operationalised, and so future research ought to consider alternative approaches.

Another potential limitation is the lack of a context used in the present study for the offer of a partial apology and its perception. Indeed, there was no person receiving a partial apology. Future research ought to consider the generalizability of the present findings to contexts in which mediations occur, for example the criminal and civil law settings (e.g., Poulson 2003), as well as non-legal settings such as the medical domain (e.g., Bismark 2009).

Past research has been criticized for being largely based on White university student samples (Meier 1998). By contrast, the present study involved a non-university sample of young people who ranged in ethnicity, education level, employment status and past experience with crime and victimization. It remains to be seen, however, how the existing findings generalize to older (and younger) samples.

Further research should explore the boundary conditions for the present findings. For instance, a partial apology may be given in response to different levels of harm committed. A partial apology may be the result of social pressure instead of being wholly voluntary, it may be offered soon after a wrongdoing or much later, and it may be communicated directly or

indirectly (e.g., in written form). The degree to which the present findings replicate under different conditions needs to be established.

The present study demonstrated that partial apologies imply components of apology that were not explicitly communicated. Future research ought to investigate whether the apologizer intends the receiver to extract other meanings from a partial apology. If so, then it may also be worth studying why apologizers might prefer to offer some types of partial apologies over other types, especially since past research suggests that the fullness of an apology is related to the type of offence, age of receiver and gender of the apologizer (Dhami 2012). For instance, some types of partial apology may be considered to be less humiliating or more socially acceptable than others (Levi 1997).

Finally, future research could examine the effects of different types of partial apology. Although there is a growing body of research on the effects of apologies in terms of their psychological, emotional and behavioral benefits (e.g., Robbennolt 2003, Skarlicki *et al.* 2004, Risen and Gilovich 2007, Wooten 2009), such research does not systematically vary the nature of apology. If partial apologies do communicate a broad set of meanings, whether intended or not, then one might predict their effects to be similar to that observed for full apologies.

An earlier study by Scher and Darley (1997) found that perceptions of the appropriateness of an apology were greater when the apology contained only one component than when it comprised more components. Thus, future research could also examine whether there is a 'backfire' or reduced effect in terms of the benefits that can be gleaned by offering a fuller apology. Is this effect dependent on the number of components in the apology or the type of components in the apology?

In sum, the offer of an apology is an expressive social interaction used to resolve conflicts. It is believed that effective apologies should be full or contain multiple components

(Goffman 1971). However, sometimes, as Latif (2001) argues, a partial apology is all that is needed. The present findings suggest that the seeming effectiveness of a partial apology may be partly explained by the fact that it communicates much more than what is explicitly stated by the apologizer.

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Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of the Extent to Which a Partial Apology Implies Other of Components of Apology

Partial Apology		
Component	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	Accept responsibility	
Acknowledge harm	7.13	1.89
Express remorse	7.06	1.81
Offer reparation	6.50	2.25
Promise forbearance	6.75	2.49
Acknowledge harm		
Accept responsibility	7.53	2.17
Express remorse	6.97	2.00
Offer reparation	6.22	2.14
Promise forbearance	5.97	1.94
Express remorse		
Accept responsibility	7.06	1.69
Acknowledge harm	6.00	1.71
Offer reparation	5.56	1.82
Promise forbearance	5.94	2.08
Offer reparation		
Accept responsibility	7.13	2.25
Acknowledge harm	7.06	2.29
Express remorse	7.00	2.61
Promise forbearance	5.25	2.89
Promise forbearance		
Accept responsibility	6.94	1.77
Acknowledge harm	6.06	1.77
Express remorse	5.44	1.75
Offer reparation	5.25	2.35