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The Psychology of Offering an Apology:  
Understanding the Barriers to Apologizing and How to Overcome Them

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## **Abstract**

After committing an offense, a transgressor faces an important decision regarding whether and how to apologize to the person who was harmed. The actions he or she chooses to take after committing an offense can have dramatic implications for the victim, the transgressor, and their relationship. Although high quality apologies are extremely effective at promoting reconciliation, transgressors often choose to offer a perfunctory apology, withhold an apology, or respond defensively to the victim. Why might this be? In this article, I propose three major barriers to offering high quality apologies: (1) *low concern for the victim or relationship*, (2) *perceived threat to self-image*, and (3) *perceived apology ineffectiveness*. I review recent research examining how these barriers affect transgressors' apology behavior, and describe insights this emerging work provides for developing methods to move transgressors towards more reparative behavior. Finally, I discuss important directions for future research.

*Keywords:* Apologies, Defensiveness, Conflict Resolution, Interpersonal Relationships

In all relationship contexts, people hurt each other. Whether small or large—an insulting comment, a forgotten birthday, an act of infidelity—these interpersonal offenses can have psychological, physiological, and relational consequences for the transgressor and victim (Bastian et al., 2013; Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Keicolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Fortunately, interpersonal offenses are not always destructive. A victim can forgive the transgressor, and this forgiveness can restore the victim’s feelings of closeness with the transgressor (McCullough et al., 1998), increase his or her willingness to cooperate with the transgressor (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004), and improve his or her personal wellbeing (Lawler et al., 2003). Moreover, actively working to resolve relationship conflicts is associated with both short- and long-term benefits to the relationship (Overall, Sibley, & Travaglia 2010). Thus, people can effectively manage their offenses and mitigate the amount of harm done to the discordant relationship and its individual members.

What influences whether the destructive consequences of interpersonal offenses can be attenuated? Research on conflict management suggests that an apology is one of the most powerful tools that transgressors can use to resolve an offense, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the victim (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; Fisher & Exline, 2006). Among other benefits, apologies help victims feel validated, improve victims’ evaluations of their transgressors, decrease victims’ aggression toward their transgressors, and increase victims’ empathy and willingness to forgive their transgressors (Barkat, 2002; Eaton, 2006; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989).

However, even though apologies can be immensely beneficial, transgressors often do not apologize or do not apologize well. It is well established that this failure to apologize often stems from transgressors’ tendency to morally disengage from the wrongfulness of their actions, by, for

example, justifying or denying responsibility for the offense (Bandura, 1999; Schönbach, 1990). Indeed, past research has demonstrated the existence of a “magnitude gap” (Baumeister, 1997) between victims’ and transgressors’ accounts of an offense, with transgressors being more likely to cast the incident as justifiable, out of their control, provoked by the victim, and having fewer lasting consequences (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1990). However, consideration of emerging work suggests that *even when* transgressors recognize their responsibility in harming someone, they often withhold high quality apologies. Why might this be? In the present article, I identify three major barriers that transgressors face when deciding whether and how to apologize for offenses they recognize having committed. I review recent research examining how these barriers affect transgressors’ apologies, discuss the implications of this framework for improving conflict processes, and describe directions for future research.

### **Barriers to Offering High Quality Apologies**

Decades of research have supported the benefits of apologies, especially high quality apologies that are comprehensive (i.e., include many apology elements, such as an acceptance of responsibility and offer of repair) and non-defensive (i.e., do not include self-protective strategies such as justifications or victim-blaming; see Schumann, 2014). However, only recently have researchers devoted considerable attention to the side of the transgressor and the factors that influence whether and how transgressors apologize after recognizing their offense. I propose that three main barriers to apologizing emerge from this growing literature: (1) feeling low levels of concern for the victim or one’s relationship with the victim, (2) perceiving that apologizing will threaten one’s self-image, and (3) perceiving that apologizing will be ineffective at eliciting forgiveness. Although not an exhaustive list of all possible barriers (e.g., transgressors might be unaware of what comprises a good apology), I propose that these three are likely the most

common and influential barriers transgressors encounter when they acknowledge they have committed a wrongdoing. I describe each of these barriers below, in the order in which they are likely to exert an influence on transgressors' apology behavior.

### **Low Concern for the Victim or Relationship**

The act of apologizing is an other-oriented behavior that first requires the recognition that the victim has been offended (Dunlop, Lee, Ashton, Butcher, Dykstra, 2015), followed by a desire to repair one's relationship with the victim (Tavuchis, 1991). By apologizing, a transgressor is attempting to reconnect with the victim by communicating remorse and concern for his or her welfare (Schumann, 2014). Moreover, apologizing carries with it the risk of being rejected, as a victim can choose to disregard the apology and deny the transgressor forgiveness (Tavuchis, 1991). An apology might therefore be considered a relationship-promotive behavior that has the potential to achieve social connection, but comes with a real risk of rejection (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006).

Because apologizing requires an awareness of the victim's needs and a prioritization of one's relationship with the victim, I propose that transgressors who feel low concern for the victim or their relationship with the victim are less willing to engage in this relationship-promotive behavior. Supporting the existence of this barrier, recent studies have demonstrated that transgressors who report lower versus higher levels of empathic concern, perspective taking, and care for others' welfare report lower proclivity to apologize (Howell, Dopko, Turowski, & Buro 2011; Howell, Turowski, & Buro, 2012), transgressors who intentionally harmed the victim and consequently feel less guilty are less willing to apologize (Leunissen, de Cremer, Folmer, & Van Dijke, 2013), and transgressors who are more avoidantly attached to the victim (i.e., are more averse to relationship closeness) offer less comprehensive and more defensive apologies

(Schumann & Orehek, under review). In addition, several studies suggest that people who are disproportionately focused on the self rather than others are less willing to apologize. For example, transgressors who are high in narcissistic tendencies report lower proclivity to apologize (Howell et al., 2011), as do transgressors who are low on the HEXACO trait of honesty-humility and thus tend to feel self-important (Dunlop et al., 2015). Although all correlational, these findings provide strong convergent evidence that low levels of concern for the person who was hurt or one's relationship with that person can stand in the way of offering high quality apologies. Upon recognizing they have harmed someone, this is likely the first barrier that exerts an influence on transgressors' apology behavior; if transgressors are not motivated to mend their relationship or the victim's feelings by apologizing, they should be less inclined to consider how an apology might threaten their self-image (barrier #2) or fail to promote forgiveness (barrier #3).

### **Perceived Threat to Self-Image**

The act of harming another person can pose a serious threat to one's self-image as a good and moral person who is worthy of maintaining positive social relationships—characteristics that are of utmost importance to us as humans (Aronson, 1999). After committing an offense, transgressors report feeling guilty and ashamed of themselves, see themselves as less moral, and rate themselves lower on various human attributes (Bastian et al., 2013; Fisher & Exline, 2006). One might expect these feelings to motivate an apology as a strategy for repairing a transgressor's self-image by signifying personal growth (e.g., see Leach & Cidam, 2015 for a review of when shame motivates reparative behavior). Supporting this view, apologies effectively reduce guilt and shame, increase feelings of integrity, and promote self-forgiveness (Carpenter, Carlisle, & Tsang, 2014; Okimoto, Wenzel, & Hedrick, 2013; Witvliet, Hinman,

Exline, & Brandt, 2011).

Despite these benefits, however, transgressors are often reluctant to apologize. Recent work suggests this reluctance might stem from a tendency for transgressors to overestimate the aversiveness of apologizing, anticipating that it will feel more humiliating and stressful to apologize than it actually feels (Leunissen, De Cremer, van Dijke, & Reinders Folmer, 2014). Because an apology inherently associates a transgressor with wrongful behavior, transgressors might often feel that apologizing is further endangering their sense of being a good person. Comprehensive apologies might be particularly threatening in this regard, as they include many elements—such as an acceptance of responsibility and acknowledgement of harm—that require transgressors to say things that call attention to the immorality and negative consequences of their actions (Schumann, 2014). Thus, I propose that transgressors often view an apology as threatening to their self-image and consequently hesitate to offer one, even when they are highly concerned about the victim and their relationship.

Consistent with this view, transgressors who believe personality is fixed (versus malleable) and thus feel that accepting blame for a wrongdoing threatens their stable moral character are less likely to apologize or take responsibility for their offenses (Hornsey et al., 2017; Schumann & Dweck, 2014). Transgressors are also less likely to apologize when they have more fragile self-views, such as when they are lower in self-esteem, higher in narcissism, and more concerned with managing the impression they make to others (Howell et al., 2011). Moreover, transgressors are less defensive when they believe others see them as a good person despite their actions (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013), and report greater willingness to reconcile after their moral image has been restored by a message of acceptance from the victim (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Finally, transgressors feel a boost to their sense of power and self-esteem when

they refuse to apologize, suggesting that withholding an apology might be used as a strategy to alleviate self-image threat (Okimoto et al., 2013). Taken together, these findings point to perceiving a threat to one's self-image as a significant barrier to offering high quality apologies.

### **Perceived Apology Ineffectiveness**

Even when transgressors feel high concern for the victim or relationship and do not regard an apology as a threat to their self-image, they might still withhold an apology because they are pessimistic about an apology's ability to elicit forgiveness. Recent work suggests that transgressors underestimate the positive consequences of apologizing, misjudging how likely the victim is to accept an apology and how helpful the apology will be in restoring the damaged relationship and promoting forgiveness (Leunissen et al., 2014). Thus, I propose that transgressors are reluctant to invest the effort into apologizing when they do not believe the apology will repair the harm done by the offense. Evidence for this barrier is just beginning to emerge, but suggests that transgressors are vigilant for information regarding their chances of repairing their relationship and adjust their responses accordingly. For example, transgressors are more willing to apologize (Leunissen, De Cremer, & Reinders Folmer, 2012) and are less defensive (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013) when they see the victim as willing or likely to forgive them. These findings provide compelling initial evidence that having doubts about an apology's effectiveness can form a third barrier to offering high quality apologies.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

The field's recent consideration of the transgressor's perspective has yielded important advances in our understanding of conflict resolution processes, as the transgressor represents an important piece of the puzzle. Although this work is just beginning, it offers promising insights that better equips researchers to develop methods for moving transgressors towards more



reparative behavior. Illustrating this possibility, three recent investigations tested methods for promoting high quality apologies by reducing the barrier of self-image threat. In one, protecting transgressors' global self-image via a values affirmation allowed them to offer more comprehensive and less defensive apologies (Schumann, 2014). In another, restoring transgressors' moral self-image by allowing them to affirm their commitment to the values they had violated increased their desire for reconciliation (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014). In a third, teaching people a malleable view of personality increased their willingness to accept responsibility by helping them view this acceptance as an opportunity for personal growth rather than as a threat to their character (Schumann & Dweck, 2014). These studies suggest that more constructive responses can be elicited by precisely targeting the problematic psychology that prevents transgressors from offering high quality apologies.

In the future, researchers might develop methods that target the barrier of low concern for the victim or relationship. For example, they might examine whether instructing transgressors to take the victim's perspective (Dovidio et al., 2004) or increasing transgressors' effort to empathize (Schumann, Zaki, & Dweck, 2014) can promote higher quality apologies by enhancing concern for the victim. Likewise, they might consider how to alter people's perceptions of apology ineffectiveness, particularly when those perceptions do not align with reality. For example, they might examine whether exposing transgressors to accounts of successful apologies or having them generate their own messages about the benefits of apologies can promote higher quality apologies by enhancing their perceived effectiveness.

Future research might also test whether the three barriers typically influence transgressors' apology behavior in the order presented here, as no empirical work has yet studied this temporal process. In addition, researchers might examine whether and how the three barriers

interact with each other to affect apology behavior. Although each of the barriers can independently reduce a transgressor's likelihood of apologizing, it is possible that certain barriers tend to co-occur or that the combined presence of several barriers is particularly detrimental to the apology process. Understanding how these barriers function together can help us identify the conditions under which transgressors are least likely to apologize and how we might design interventions that allow transgressors to overcome these formidable conditions.

Another fruitful direction for future work is to test whether interventions can enduringly alter transgressors' responses by creating experiences that chip away at the barriers to apologizing. For example, an affirmed transgressor who apologizes might receive compassion and forgiveness from the victim. This positive reinforcement might then reduce the extent to which the transgressor perceives apologies as ineffective or threatening to her self-image, ultimately making her more likely to apologize for a future offense. Because interpersonal offenses are everyday experiences that occur across all or nearly all relationship contexts, ages, and cultures, understanding ways to promote lasting changes to people's apology behavior could meaningfully improve conflict-related outcomes in a variety of domains. For example, these interventions could be particularly useful for couples seeking marital therapy, organizations seeking to improve employee relations and workplace functioning, conflict mediators seeking to improve methods for resolving disputes, and teachers seeking to manage peer conflicts on the playground and in the classroom. The field's new focus on the transgressor's perspective—coupled with continuing work on the victim's perspective—promises more complete knowledge of the psychological processes at work during these types of complex conflict situations, knowledge that can ultimately be leveraged to resolve them.

### **End Note**

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### Recommended Readings

Fehr, R., Gelfand, M. J., & Nag, M. (2010). The road to forgiveness: A meta-analytic synthesis of its situational and dispositional correlates. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136, 894-914.

A meta-analysis demonstrating the effectiveness of apologies in promoting forgiveness.

Howell, A.J., Dopko, R.L., Turowski, J.B., & Buro, K. (2011). The disposition to apologize.

*Personality and Individual Differences*, 51, 509-514. A brief summary of a variety of individual difference predictors of proclivity to apologize.

Leunissen, J. M., De Cremer, D., Dijke, M. H. van & Reinders Folmer, C. P. (2014).

Forecasting errors in the averseness of an apology. *Social Justice Research*, 27(3), 322-339. A recent article describing the forecasting errors people make when judging the aversiveness and expected benefits of apologizing.

Schumann, K. (2014). An affirmed self and a better apology: The effect of self-affirmation on transgressors' responses to victims. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 54, 89-96. A recent article providing a framework of high quality apologies and presenting a method for promoting apologies by reducing perceived self-image threat.

Shnabel, N. & Nadler, A. (2008). A needs-based model of reconciliation: Satisfying the differential emotional needs of victim and perpetrator as a key to promoting reconciliation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94, 116-132.

A recent article examining transgressors' psychological and emotional needs after committing an offense.