But, I said I was Sorry: An Examination into the Interrelationship between Transgression Severity and Relationship Closeness on Apology Acceptance, Forgiveness, and Anger

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ABSTRACT
While we encounter transgressions on a daily basis, we do not know all the factors that impact apology acceptance, forgiveness, and associated anger. The purpose of this study was to examine the relations between transgression severity and relationship closeness on apology acceptance, forgiveness, and anger. It was hypothesized that there would be a main effect of severity on apology acceptance, forgiveness, and anger, as well as an interaction between offense severity and relationship type on apology acceptance. Sixty-six undergraduate students were asked to read four scenarios that varied in offense severity and transgressor/victim relationship. The scenarios described either a low severity or a high severity situation, and varied between the transgressor being either a friend or an acquaintance. The participants rated the likelihood that they would accept an apology from the transgressor, forgive the transgressor, and indicated their level of associated anger. There was a main effect of severity on all three dependent variables such that participants were angrier if the situation was more severe, and were less likely to forgive or accept apologies if the transgression was severe. Further there was a main effect of relationship type such that participants were more likely to accept apologies from friends and more likely to forgive them, yet they also felt they would be angrier at friends. There were not interactions between relationship type and severity for apology acceptance or forgiveness, but a trend towards an interaction was found for anger, such that participants noted more anger towards acquaintances compared to friends if the transgression was low in severity, but if the transgression was severe, high anger was directed to friends and acquaintances alike. There are implications of these data for interpersonal relationships and social skills training.
Explorations | Social Sciences

What happens when you do something wrong? If you show up late to work, you apologize. If you bump into someone at the store, you apologize. In that sense, apologies can seem perfunctory. However, if you crash into someone's car and apologize, can that apology compare to the previous ones?

Apologies are used in various situations and seem to serve different purposes. For example, public apologies are utilized by politicians and celebrities and personal apologies are used on a much smaller scale. Do people apologize with an expectation of being forgiven for their transgressions? There are many variables and situations that may determine the likelihood of an apology being accepted, or the likelihood that forgiveness will occur after a transgression, and associated anger. This project examined two variables: offense severity and the type of relationship between the victim and the transgressor.

Forgiveness
Several factors play a role in the expression of forgiveness. Kirchhoff, Wagner, and Strack (2012) researched the role of verbal components, anger reduction and offence severity on apologies. In this study, the researchers analyzed whether the inclusion of more verbal elements in an apology increases the likelihood that its receiver would forgive, particularly after more severe offenses. Verbal elements in terms of this study include admitting fault, addressing emotions and naming the offense. The researchers provided the participants with scenarios varying in offense severity, followed by a questionnaire which asked under which conditions the participants would be willing to forgive the transgressor. Some participants were asked to read about a verbal confrontation with a neighbor and some read about a physical confrontation. Kirchhoff et al. found that after more severe events, more elaborate apologies were needed for the victim to forgive the transgressor. This showed that serious offenses are more difficult to forgive and therefore require a different type of an apology rather than “I’m sorry.” A more complete apology is required, including but not limited to naming the offense, addressing emotions and admitting fault. Less severe instances and more comprehensive apologies seem to increase the likelihood of forgiveness in relationships with strangers, according to this study.

Similarly, Merolla and Zhang (2011) found factors that impact forgiveness in personal relationships, rather than in acquaintance relationships as in Kirchhoff, et al.’s (2012) study. Merolla and Zhang found that certain elements impacted the type of forgiveness that victims of transgressions are willing to give. Researchers asked participants to recall an incident with someone close to them in which they forgave the offender; the participants were subsequently asked questions about that incident. Merolla and Zhang found that offender remorse and offense severity were predictive of certain types of forgiveness. Specifically, offense severity was found to negatively predict indirect forgiveness, instances where forgiveness is just understood. In other words, in high severity situations direct forgiveness, explicitly telling transgressor that they are forgiven, is expected in personal relationships.

Merolla (2008) studied forgiveness with the inclusion of relationship type. Merolla examined the difference in forgiveness in dating relationships and platonic relationships. Participants in Merolla’s study were asked to recall a time in which they forgave a close friend or a dating partner. They were then given a questionnaire that contained questions about that incident. Merolla found that the type of forgiveness differed as offenses became more severe, and differed along relationship types. As transgressions became more and more severe, dating partners changed in the type of forgiveness they were willing to give, but this pattern was not seen in the friendship relationships. In dating relationships, forgiveness was given conditionally, but in friendships, forgiveness was given indirectly. This suggests that there might be some type of interaction between relationship type, and offense severity.
on likelihood of forgiveness. Even though Merolla’s study involved different types of forgiveness, it implies that severity, victim-offender relationship, and apology acceptance are all interrelated.

Chan (2011) also examined the connection between offense severity, relationship type, and forgiveness. The participants in Chan’s study were asked to recall a transgression in which they were wronged by someone, and to thoroughly describe the incident. Then the participants rated offense severity, relationship closeness, forgiveness and other associated factors. Chan found a negative correlation between offense severity and forgiveness— that is, when offenses were more severe, it was harder to forgive them. This finding is consistent with Merolla (2008), Merolla and Zhang (2011) and Kirchhoff, et al. (2012). However, Chan notably found no significant difference on forgiveness between victim and offender relationship types; this finding is different from that of Merolla (2008) and Merolla and Zhang (2011).

Another study by Mead (2008) further explored forgiveness and relationships. Mead compared ambivalent relationships with positive friendships in terms of apologetic factors; included concession, excuse, justification, and refusal. Essentially, Mead (2008) provided the participants with a script of a hypothetical interpersonal transgression that occurred between either an acquaintance or a friend. After reading the scenario, the participants were asked to complete an inventory which measured forgiveness. The results showed that participants were indeed more willing to forgive in friendships (Mead, 2008). This provides evidence that there is some type of difference in forgiveness behavior due to relationship type, contrary to Chan’s (2011) study.

Apology Acceptance

One of the influential factors on apology acceptance was researched by Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani (2008). They studied the impact of accidental offenses versus intentional offenses and determined their impact on forgiveness and apology acceptance. The study used a scripted situation in which the participant was negatively impacted by a confederate’s actions. The confederate alternated between intentionally destroying the participant’s property and doing it accidentally. Struthers et al. found that when there were intentional transgressions, apologies were less likely to be accepted and forgiveness was less likely than if the transgression was perceived as unintentional. In this study, Struthers et al. were able to isolate two separate factors that impacted apology acceptance: accidental transgressions and intentional transgressions.

Similarly, Bennet and Earwaker (1994) determined what factors influenced whether or not an apology was accepted. The researchers studied the severity of the offense and offender responsibility. The participants in this study were presented with various scenarios which varied in transgressor responsibility and offense severity. The participants indicated their likelihood of rejecting an apology. The results indicated that participants were more inclined to reject an apology in conditions with high severity and for conditions with high responsibility. The researchers also found that as offense severity increased, it was more likely that an apology would be rejected. Kirchhoff et al. (2012) also provided evidence that conditions of high offense severity resulted in less likelihood of apology acceptance. In addition to asking if the participants about forgiveness, the questionnaire provided to the participants also asked the participants how likely they would be to accept the apology from the transgressor. Kirchhoff et al. concluded that offense severity did have an impact on apology acceptance, providing further evidence of the interaction between apology acceptance and offense severity.

Anger

In addition to testing forgiveness and apology acceptance on offense severity and relationship type, many researchers also incorporate associated anger within the context.
of their studies. For example, Kirchhoff et al. (2012) found a negative correlation between anger and forgiveness. Therefore, the study illustrated the connection between anger and apology acceptance. The researchers saw anger reduction as a precursor to apology acceptance and forgiveness; so, in other words, anger had to be reduced in order for apology acceptance and forgiveness to occur.

In Bennet and Earwaker’s (1994) study on offense severity and offender responsibility, the participants also indicated their level of anger associated with the transgression in addition to specifying their likelihood of accepting an apology. In addition to finding support for their hypotheses, Bennet and Earwaker found that there was a relation between offense severity and anger. They showed that anger ratings were higher in the high responsibility and high severity conditions than in the low responsibility and low severity conditions; additionally, they found that the victim’s anger dissipated more quickly when the offense was less severe.

Whitesell and Harter (1996) tested interpersonal context anger with children. The researchers examined the level of anger a child expressed toward their friends as opposed to their classmates after being presented with hypothetical situations. The children were asked to indicate who their best friend was in the beginning of the study, and then they were presented with a scenario using that person’s name or the name of another classmate. The results of this study showed that the children indicated higher levels of anger after an apology toward friends compared to other classmates. This indicates that relationship type may impact the level of associated anger involved in a transgression.

The Current Study

Many of the factors that influence apology acceptance, forgiveness, and anger include offense severity and offender-victim relationship. Because of the many aspects and the multifaceted quality of apologies, I wanted to study these variables to see how they were interrelated. In previous research, apology acceptance and forgiveness have been examined both as interchangeable constructs as well as different entities; both dependent variables are shown to be impacted similarly by offense severity and relationship type (Kirchhoff et al., 2012; Merolla, 2008; Bennet & Earwaker, 1994). Therefore, I decided to include both apology acceptance and forgiveness as separate dependent variables. Moreover, I was interested in both offense severity and more intimate or personal relationships and how they differed from stranger or acquaintance relationships. In the same respect, I was interested in how offense severity interacts with the offender-victim relationship type.

Therefore, the independent variables in this study were severity of offense (low-high) and offender-victim relationship (acquaintance-friend). Dependent variables were acceptance of apology, forgiveness, and anger.

The hypotheses of the current study were: (H₁) There will be a main effect of severity of offense on anger, forgiveness and apology acceptance, such that participants will report higher levels of anger and lower levels of apology acceptance and forgiveness as the severity of the offense increases. (H₂) There will be an interaction between offense severity and relationship on apology acceptance. Specifically, participants will report that they are less likely to accept apologies from a friend than an acquaintance in more severe cases.

The current study differs from the previous studies in regards to study design. This study used a within-groups design and participants were provided with hypothetical situations rather than asked to recall personal instances as in the studies by Merolla (2008), Merolla and Zhang (2011), and Chan (2011). Furthermore, this study evaluated self-reported effects of offense severity and relationship with respect to apology acceptance, forgiveness, and anger together; this allowed us to examine potential interactions.
Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 66 undergraduate students (42 women, 24 men) at a small private university in the southeastern United States. The students completed the study as part of their required research credit for an Introductory Psychology course. The subjects were between the ages of 18 and 22 years old (M = 19.65, SD = .89). The participants were Caucasian (83%), African American (9%) and other (8%). The majority of the participants were sophomores in college (64%), with some freshman (15%), juniors (13%), and seniors (8%).

Materials

Offense Scenarios. There were a total of four conditions/scenarios. The scenarios used in the current study were adapted from Kirchhoff, et al. (2012); the scenarios varied by low and high severity as well as whether or not the offense was committed by a friend or an acquaintance (see Appendix A).

Dependent measures. The questions following the scenario asked the participants to rate on a scale from 1-10: 1) how likely they were to accept an apology from the transgressor, 2) how likely they were to forgive the transgressor, and 3) how angry they would be following the event (see Appendix B).

Procedure

This experiment used a 2x2 within-subjects factorial design. After collecting informed consent, the participants were given a demographic sheet (asking gender, age, ethnicity, major and year in school) and the stimulus material. Participants read each of the four scenarios that varied in severity (low and high) and relationship type (acquaintance or friendship); then, after each scenario, they rated levels of anger, likelihood to forgive offender and likelihood to accept an apology from the offender. The participants were asked to work alone and quietly on the survey. After the participants finished, the surveys were collected, and the participants were read a debriefing statement.

Results

Likelihood of Apology Acceptance

Offense severity and relationship type affected the likelihood that participants would accept apologies; main effects of severity and relationship type were found. As shown in Table 1, participants were more likely to accept apologies from friends compared to acquaintances (F(1,64)=157.11, p<.0001), and were more likely to accept apologies when the transgression was less severe (F(1,64)=26.29, p<.0001). Further, there was not a significant interaction between

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Apology Acceptance depending on Offense Severity and Relationship Type
relationship type and offense severity on likelihood of apology acceptance.

**Likelihood of Forgiveness**

Likewise, offense severity and relationship type affected the likelihood that participants felt that they would forgive the offender (see Table 2). Participants were more likely to forgive the transgressor in the less severe situation ($F(1,64)=29.85$, $p<.0001$). Relationship to the offender had an impact on forgiveness as well such that participants felt that they would be more likely to forgive a friend rather than an acquaintance ($F(1,64)=158.65$, $p<.0001$). Additionally, there was not a significant interaction between relationship type and offense severity on forgiveness.

**Degree of Anger**

Severity and relationship type also had an impact on the participants’ degree of expected anger, as shown in Table 3. Participants indicated that they would be angrier in more severe situations ($F(1,63)=158.27$, $p<.0001$) and participants indicated that they would be angrier with an acquaintance rather than a friend ($F(1,63)=8.81$, $p=.004$). Further, there was a trend towards an interaction effect of severity and relationship type, $F(1,63)=3.05$, $p=.085$, seen in Figure 1. Paired samples t-tests were used to examine this trend. In low severity transgressions, participants were angrier if the transgressor was an acquaintance compared to a friend ($p<.05$), but in high severity transgression, it did not matter whether

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*Table 2*  
Means and Standard Deviations for Forgiveness depending on Offense Severity and Relationship Type

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*Table 3*  
Means and Standard Deviations for Anger depending on Offense Severity and Relationship Type
the transgressor was friend or acquaintance; anger was high regardless.

**Discussion**

**Summary of Results**

This study examined the relationship between transgression severity and relationship closeness on apology acceptance, forgiveness, and anger. The data obtained provide strong support for the first hypothesis. There was a main effect of severity of offense found on anger, forgiveness, and apology acceptance. The participants reported that they would be more likely to accept an apology from the offender in the less severe condition than in the more severe condition. The participants reported that they would be more likely to forgive the offender in low severity cases. The participants reported that they would be angrier due to a high severity situation. Thus, severity was found to have an impact on all three of the dependent variables, which is consistent with the previous research.

In addition, a main effect of relationship type was found for all three dependent variables. The participants reported that they would be more likely to accept an apology from a friend than an acquaintance, and that they would be more likely to forgive a friend compared to an acquaintance. The participants reported that they would be slightly angrier if the transgressor was an acquaintance. The main effects of relationship type were all consistent with previous research, except in the case of associated anger. Whitesell and Harter’s (1996) results actually concluded the opposite of this study’s findings. Whitesell and Harter found that participants were angrier when the transgressor was a friend.

Whitesell and Harter’s (1996) study focused on children while the current study used college students. Also, the participants in Whitesell and Harter’s study indicated a friend in the beginning of the procedures whose name was used as an element of the study. The current study did not provide the participants with a particular “friend” or “acquaintance”. Perhaps if an actual friend was indicated, participants would report higher levels of anger in the study. These procedural differences could account for the different results suggesting that it may be important to personalize scenarios.
The second hypothesis, that there would be an interaction between offense severity and relationship for the dependent variable of apology acceptance, was not supported by this study. The participants did not report that they were less likely to accept apologies from a friend than an acquaintance in the high severity condition. Rather, the data pointed to a different interaction. Instead of an interaction found for the dependent variable of apology acceptance, there was a trend towards an interaction found for anger. Due to the trend towards an interaction that was noticed, severity and relationship alone cannot explain levels of anger. Rather, the severity and relationship must have an impact on one another especially in the acquaintance high severity and friend high severity conditions. This relationship was not expected. The previous research pointed to possibly an interaction of severity and relationship type on apology acceptance (or forgiveness when used interchangeably). Mead (2008) concluded that participants were more willing to forgive positive relationships, or friendships; but Chan (2011) concluded that there was no relationship type difference. Furthermore, Merolla (2008) found differences in likelihood to forgive based on relationship type and offense severity.

The trend for an interaction between severity and relationship type on degree of reported anger is somewhat consistent with the findings of Whitesell and Harter (1996). They reported that when friends were the transgressors in a situation, the victims reported more associated anger. In the current study, while we found that the general trend was for participants to think that they would experience more anger towards acquaintances instead of friends, in the high severity situation the difference between anger ratings for friends and anger ratings for acquaintances was similar. Thus, the results for the high severity situation are more consistent with Whitesell and Harter's findings, suggesting that the relation between offense severity, relationship type, and associated anger is more complicated than hypothesized.

**Study Implications**

The findings in this study may help people understand real-world interactions. For instance, the current findings may help a transgressor understand why someone is angry and understand why an apology might not be accepted; perhaps it is due to the severity of the offense or the relationship. Additionally, this study has further implications for intrapersonal relationships. Being able to predict the outcome of an offense or an apology could be helpful for people anticipating the result of telling the truth. If the likelihood that the apology will be accepted is low and the likelihood that the victim will be angry is high, then an individual should prepare him or herself for that situation.

**Study Limitations**

In administering the study materials to the participants, it was noticed that participant fatigue might have limited the study; some participants seemed to get tired of reading the scenarios after the second scenario. Carryover effects, a common limitation of within-subjects designs, are also a concern; the participants did read four very similar scenarios, and they were always administered in the same order. The effect of gender differences, counterbalancing, and order were not addressed. Thus, a between-groups design might have been perhaps a stronger research design. This would have limited participant fatigue as well as carryover effects. However, that design does not allow participants to compare across scenarios. Furthermore, in the current study the participants were provided with hypothetical situations. In previous research, participants were asked to provide a real life situation. Differences might occur if participants had imagined hypothetical situations, rather than recall real events with real people. These limitations need to be addressed in any further research.

**Future Research**

In the future, it might be interesting to further explore the interaction between offense severity and relationship type in terms of
associated anger. Would increasing the severity have a more significant impact on the interaction? Further, in the current study, the high severity situation involved moderate physical contact which increased in context of the scenario. If the high severity situation were to describe more serious physical contact, would the level of associated anger increase based on the relationship type (friend or acquaintance)? Would increasing the severity further exaggerate the interaction between offense severity and relationship type on associated anger? And if so, what would the increased level of severity to the measures of apology acceptance and forgiveness? In the current study and in Kirchoff et al. (2012) study, the physical contact noted in the severe situation was minimal. However, in studies by Merolla (2008), Merolla and Zhang (2011), and Chan (2011), participants were asked to recall their own situations. Therefore, the severity of the situations was not uniform. Evaluating varying levels of severe offenses that include serious physical contact may impact the levels of associated anger, forgiveness and apology acceptance.

It might also be interesting to test for gender differences as they relate to this topic. Schumann and Ross (2010) tested for gender differences in perceiving offensive behavior. In Schumann and Ross’s study, the participants were asked to recall past altercations and asked to indicate the severity of the incident. The researchers found that women judged the situations to be more severe, and men have a higher threshold for what constitutes as offensive. Therefore, a high severity situation for women might not be the same as a high severity situation for men. In terms of the current study, this would mean that the male participants might have different responses to the dependent variables than women because the high severity condition, to them, is not as severe in comparison to the women participants.

The current study discussed factors immediately following a hypothetical transgression. Interestingly, a study by Maltby, Wood, Day, Kon, Colley, & Linley (2008) examined factors that impact relationships years after a transgression. The participants involved in Maltby et al.’s study were asked to recall a very serious or an extremely serious transgression and write about it. The written statement about the transgression were sealed away and returned to the participant 30 months later. When given back their written statement, the participants were then asked to assess their residual feelings and also fill out the NEO-FFI; a personality inventory that determines measures of conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness to experiences, and extraversion (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The researchers found that personality factors had an impact on the relationship years later. If personality factors indicate differences in relationships years after the initial transgression, it might explain levels of associated anger in regards to the current study. Perhaps levels of associated anger could be influenced by personality factors. Examining personality factors and how they correlate with associated anger, forgiveness, and apology acceptance could be an interesting direction for further research.

Conclusion
Apologies are ubiquitous. If we step on someone’s foot, we apologize. If we call someone the wrong name, we apologize. Likewise, we forgive such offenses. Through this research we varied offense severity and relationship type, to see their impact on apology acceptance, forgiveness, and associated anger. The study provided several findings that may help our understanding of the relation between offense severity, relationship type, and anger on apologies. But there are still questions to consider in regards to this topic, and it is important to keep those in mind in future research.
References


Appendix A

Low Severity Scenario: Imagine that you live in a rental home with several apartments. On your floor you have a (direct neighbor or good friend of yours). You have known each other for one year and so far there have been no issues. You have always greeted each other friendly. However, with this (neighbor or friend) you had a small dispute last week. When you met incidentally in the hallway, (the neighbor or your friend) complained that you have made too much noise lately. In this dispute (the neighbor or your friend) affronted you. Doing that, they also grabbed your arm. When asked, they let go. Since the incident your (neighbor or friend) has apologized for their behavior.

High Severity Scenario: Imagine that you live in a rental home with several apartments. On your floor you have a (direct neighbor or a good friend of yours). You have known each other for one year and so far there have been no issues. You have always greeted each other friendly. However, with this (neighbor or friend) you had an intense and escalated conflict last week. When you met incidentally in the hallway, (the neighbor or your friend) complained that you have made too much noise lately. In this dispute (the neighbor or your friend) yelled and meanly affronted you. Doing that, they also harshly grabbed your arm and pushed you. When asked, they did not let go and grabbed even tighter. Since the incident your (neighbor or friend) has apologized for their behavior.

Appendix B

How likely are you to accept the apology from this person?

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How likely are you to forgive this person?

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How angry would you feel after this incident?

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