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An examination of emotional empathy, attributions of stability, and the link between perceived remorse and forgiveness

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ABSTRACT

Sincere apologies can motivate forgiveness; however, there are differing theoretical perspectives on the mechanism by which this occurs. The empathy model of forgiveness suggests empathy mediates the link between apologies and forgiveness. Alternatively, attribution theory suggests that the apology–forgiveness link is best explained by attributions of behavioral stability. The empathy and attribution models both receive considerable empirical support; however, they remain relatively independent within the literature and the relationship between these mechanisms is thus far unexamined. Within interpersonal romantic relationships, we test a model of apologies and forgiveness that focuses on perceived remorse and integrates these two theoretical perspectives. We test the primary hypothesis that perceived remorse influences attributions of behavioral stability, which in turn influences forgiveness both directly and indirectly via empathy. Results from a path analysis suggest increases in perceived remorse decreased attributions of behavioral stability and increased empathy and forgiveness. Attributions of stability mediated the effect of remorse on empathy, and empathy mediated the effect of attributions of stability on forgiveness. These data establish a relationship between attributions of stability and emotional empathy perspectives and suggest an integrated model of apologies, remorse and forgiveness.

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1. Introduction

Apologies broadly function to maintain interpersonal, romantic and inter-group relations by providing a mechanism for rectifying the nearly inevitable social transgression (Goffman, 1967; Tavuchis, 1991). For the injured party, forgiving a transgression typically involves letting go of negative affect and motivations toward revenge or retaliation, despite an entitlement to such feelings (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992). Those who offer an apology tend to receive more forgiveness than those who do not apologize (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003), especially when an apology is accompanied by expressions of remorse (Bornstein, Lahana, & Miller, 2002; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Förster, & Montada, 2004). When social transgressions occur within romantic dyads, victims may be more likely to seek retaliation and engage in behavior detrimental to the relationship (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Forgiveness is an ideal outcome for a transgressor who wishes to repair the damaged romantic relationship (see: Gunderson & Ferrari, 2008; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2009).

Evidence supports a causal link between giving an apology and eliciting forgiveness across relationships (see Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003; McCullough et al., 1997; Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004); however, there are two different theoretical mechanisms suggested for this effect. One line of research (the empathy model; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; McCullough et al., 1997) proposes that an apology causes a motivation to forgive by promoting victims' empathetic concern for the offender. A parallel perspective suggests an apology facilitates the perception that the offending behavior is unlikely to occur again, causing decreases in attributions of behavioral stability and thus motivating forgiveness (the attribution model; Gold & Davis, 2005; Gold & Weiner, 2000; Takaku, 2001; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). Independently, these explanations receive considerable experimental support; however, the nature of the relationship *between* these mechanisms remains unexamined. Our research integrates these two perspectives by testing predictions regarding the relationship between empathetic concern and attributions of stability as co-mediators of the link between perceived remorse and forgiveness.

1.1. An attribution model of apologies and forgiveness

Attribution theory suggests that an apology may function as a tool for impression management by altering the victims' perceptions of the transgressor (Weiner et al., 1991). An apology given by a transgressor can function to influence the victims'

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attributions of causality for the offense along the dimensions of responsibility and stability (see Weiner, 1986). In the absence of an account or apology from the transgressor, a victim is likely to make internal stable attributions for the cause of the offense (Riordan, Marlin, & Kellogg, 1983). The perpetrator may offer an account with the purpose of minimizing attributions of responsibility (e.g., *It's not my fault*; Jehle, Miller, & Kemmelmeier, 2009); they may offer an apology with the purpose of minimizing attributions of stability, (e.g., *I won't do this again*; Gold & Weiner, 2000) or some combination of the two. Regardless, an apology functions to reduce dispositional attributions for the cause of the offense (Gold & Davis, 2005). When an account includes both an apology and an acceptance of responsibility, the transgressor conveys that they value the violated social rule, norm, or contract (Weiner, 1986). This leads the victim to conclude that the transgressor will likely adhere to the social rules and norms in the future, and thus the bad or unacceptable behavior cannot be reflective of their disposition (Gold & Davis, 2005). Decreased attributions of behavioral stability are associated with increased motivation to maintain positive relations with a transgressor (e.g., Hall & Fincham, 2006) and demonstrably cause increases in forgiveness (Gold & Weiner, 2000).

1.2. An empathy model of apologies and forgiveness

Emotional empathy has been the focus of a great deal of research on forgiveness following transgressions in the context of interpersonal and romantic relations (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998; Paleari et al., 2009). The empathy model of forgiveness suggests that emotional empathy is a primary mechanism for motivating forgiveness following an apology (McCullough et al., 1997). A victim's experience of empathy leads them to care more for the transgressor and the affected relationship, making them more likely to forgive (McCullough et al., 1998). Empathy is strongly related to forgiveness (Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002) and is associated with reduced motivations toward relationship destructive behaviors like rumination, avoidance and revenge (McCullough et al., 1998). Importantly, empathy mediates the relationship between apologies and forgiveness (Brown, Wohl, & Exline, 2008; McCullough et al., 1997, Study 3).

1.3. Apologies and perceived remorse

Perceived remorse is an important feature of an apology (Gold & Weiner, 2000). Remorse is characterized by negative feelings regarding the consequences of one's behavior (Brooks & Reddon, 2003). The greater the perceived remorse, the more effective the apology is in reducing negative consequences like blame and punishment (Darby & Schlenker, 1982) and facilitating the cognitive and behavioral changes associated with forgiveness (Bornstein et al., 2002). For example, those who are convicted of a crime but apologize and are remorseful typically receive relatively lighter sentencing than those who are not remorseful (Proeve & Howells, 2006).

1.4. Remorse and the empathy model

Given that empathy mediates the causal relationship between apologies and forgiveness (Brown et al., 2008; McCullough et al., 1997, Study 3), and that remorse is an important affective component of an apology (Gold & Weiner, 2000), it is reasonable to expect that a victim's empathy mediates the relationship between perceived remorse and forgiveness. Perhaps remorse signals that the offender is suffering psychologically because of their hurtful behavior and this leads the victim to empathize with and ultimately forgive the transgressor. However, past research has not examined the empathy model of forgiveness in terms of the remorse perceived in an apology.

1.5. Remorse and the attribution model

Increases in perceived remorse cause decreases in attributions of behavioral stability and increases in forgiveness (Gold & Weiner, 2000). A remorseful apology may lead the victim to perceive that the transgressor is unlikely to engage in the aberrant behavior in the future, and this may increase their motivation to forgive. Additionally, as McCullough et al. (1997) imply in their discussion, it may be the case that unstable attributions increase victims' empathy for the transgressor; however, this implication has not been examined. To integrate these theoretical perspectives we examine the relationship between emotional empathy and attributions of stability, and their combined effect in motivating forgiveness.

1.6. Summary

The empathy model posits that the apology–forgiveness link is best understood by the victims' experience of empathy for the transgressor. An apology facilitates victims' experience of empathy, and this causes an increase in the likelihood of victims choosing to forgive. The attribution of stability model suggests that an apology influences judgments about the transgressor's future behavior. Apologies can result in unstable behavioral attributions that suggest the aberrant behavior as unlikely to occur again; this in turn causes increases in victims' forgiveness. Increases in the level of remorse perceived in an apology decrease attributions of stability and increase both empathy and forgiveness. Evidence reviewed thus far supports both empathy and stability attributions as mediators of the apology–forgiveness link; however, the relationship between these mediators is unknown.

1.7. Attributions of stability and emotional empathy

We conjecture that when a victim is considering an apology given by a transgressor, attribution processes occur proximally earlier than the victim's experience of emotional empathy. Following a remorseful apology, we expect that judging a transgressor's behavior to be unstable (decreased attributions of stability) should increase people's empathetic concern for the transgressor (Hypothesis 1). It seems likely that people will feel more sympathetic and desire to maintain a relationship with a transgressor that they perceive will not harm them again. Conjointly, behaviorally stable attributions should decrease an empathetic response. After all, why should a victim desire to continue a relationship with someone perceived as likely to behave in a similar hurtful way in the future? We predict that emotional empathy should mediate the relationship between attributions of stability and forgiveness (Hypothesis 2) and that attributions of stability and emotional empathy will completely mediate the effect of remorse on forgiveness (Hypothesis 3). To test these hypotheses, we examine the

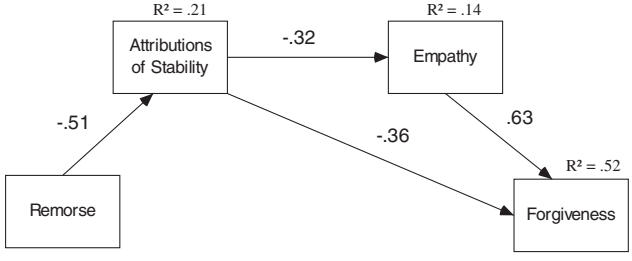

Fig. 1. Path analysis testing the hypothesized model.

covariance among remorse, attributions of stability and empathy and test a theoretical model of apologies and forgiveness that integrates both theoretical perspectives outlined above (see Fig. 1). We expect this multi-step path model with remorse predicting attributions of stability proximally prior to emotional empathy to be a better fit than a similar model predicting emotional empathy proximally prior to attributions of stability.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were university students (70 men, 100 women) who received course credit for their participation. Their median age was 21 (range 18–52). Of the 170 participants, 64.7% were White, 11.2% were Latino/Hispanic, 9.4% were African American, 11.8% indicated other ethnicities, and 2.9% declined to state their ethnicity.

2.2. Materials and procedure

All measures were administered in a survey format to participants in groups of 2–5 per session. To increase ecological validity we elicited narrative accounts of actual transgressions that our participants experienced within the context of a romantic relationship. We chose to focus specifically on romantic relationships to reduce variance between participants by limiting their narrative accounts to the same relational context. The questionnaire included instructions asking participants to recall a situation where a person they were in a close romantic relationship with did something that hurt them in some way and they remorsefully apologized. We chose to word the instructions in this way to ensure the situation involved both an apology and at least some level of expressed remorse. Participants then wrote a short synopsis of the event and responded to several dependent measures.

Five questions designed to measure empathy were created to closely model items used by McCullough et al. (1997), McCullough et al. (2003). Questions modeled after those used by Gold and Weiner (2000) and Weiner et al. (1991) were also created to measure remorse, behavioral stability and forgiveness (see Appendix). Scores on the individual items were averaged together to create single scales representing perceived empathy, remorse, behavioral stability and forgiveness. Three items measured perceptions of remorse (Cronbach's alpha = .86) with higher scores indicating greater levels of perceived remorse in the partner's apology. The empathy (Cronbach's alpha = .84) and forgiveness (Cronbach's alpha = .79; $r = .65$, $p < .001$) were measured using five and two questions, respectively, with higher scores indicating greater empathy or forgiving toward the partner who hurt them. Five questions addressed perceptions of behavioral stability (Cronbach's alpha = .93). Higher scores on the stability items indicate a belief that the individual was likely to behave in the hurtful way again.

3. Results

The written synopses were coded for transgression and relationship type by two independent raters. The raters were provided the list of categories (see Table 1) and instructed to code both the transgression for which the apology was given and the nature of the romantic relationship. Initial inter-rater agreement was 63.8% for transgression type and 84.4% for relationship type. The raters then met and resolved all coding disagreements. The vast majority of participants wrote about a transgression that occurred in a committed relationship (e.g., boyfriend, girlfriend or partner) or a dating relationship (e.g., dating or seeing someone). As expected, transgression types were much more variable with 38.8% writing about sexual infidelity and inappropriate behavior[1].

Table 1
Transgression and relationship types.

	Frequency	Percentage
Transgression type		
Sexual behavior with another	36	21.2%
Inappropriate behavior	30	17.6%
Arguing	17	10.0%
Emotional mistreatment	13	7.6%
Dating another person	12	7.1%
Emotionally unsatisfying	12	7.1%
Physical mistreatment	11	6.5%
Ending the relationship	9	5.3%
Lying	8	4.7%
Insulting	7	4.1%
Poor communication	7	4.1%
Sexually unsatisfying	1	0.6%
Relationship type		
Committed	106	62.4%
Dating	50	29.4%
Married	7	4.1%
Uncodable	7	4.1%

Note: $N = 170$, data were classified as uncodeable when the synopsis was too vague or when the participant's handwriting was impossible to clearly decipher.

Table 2
Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

Variable	*M*	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Remorse	5.24	1.52	–	−.46*	.25*	.28*
2. Stability	4.24	1.68	–	–	−.37*	−.54*
3. Empathy	3.62	1.46	–	–	–	.65*
4. Forgiveness	3.85	1.77	–	–	–	–

Note: $N = 170$.
* $p < .001$.

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among our measured variables are presented in Table 2. Increases in perceived remorse and empathy are associated with increases in forgiveness. Increases in attributions of behavioral stability, or the belief that a relationship partner would act in a similar way in the future, is associated with decreases in perceived remorse, empathy and forgiveness providing initial support to hypothesis one[2]. Using AMOS 17 we conducted path analyses on our measured variables to test the hypothesized model; the sample size was not large enough to use latent variables.

3.1. Path analysis

We began our analysis with an examination of the just identified (or saturated) model to examine the significance of the direct paths not predicted in the hypothesized model. As expected, remorse did not significantly predict emotional empathy ($\beta = .12$, $p = .13$) in the presence of attributions of stability. The inclusion of both attributions of stability and empathy rendered the path from remorse to forgiveness insignificant ($\beta = .00$, $p = .99$) suggesting that exclusion of these paths is appropriate and we proceeded to test the hypothesized model (Fig. 1).

[1] Inappropriate behavior was defined primarily as violating an expectation or an expected manner of behavior (e.g., went out with friends when they previously committed to spend time with the participant.)

[2] There were no significant gender differences for attributions of stability, empathy or forgiveness. There was a marginal effect for remorse t (167)=-1.94, $p = .054$, with women ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.42$) perceiving greater remorse than men ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.62$).

We considered the Chi-square statistic, the standardized root mean square error (SRMR), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) as estimates of model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999) and the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) to compare the hypothesized model to potential alternatives (Akaike, 1973). According to these criteria, a model is said to fit well when the Chi-square statistic is not statistically significant, SRMR is .10 or less, a CFI of .95 or greater and an RMSEA less than .08. When comparing non nested models estimated from the same data set, the model with the smallest AIC value is considered best. Overall, the hypothesized model had good fit, χ^2 (2, N = 170) = 1.57, p = .456, SRMR = .03, CFI = 1.0, and RMSEA = .000 (90% confidence limits .00, .14), AIC = 17.57 and all path coefficients were significant (p < .001; see Fig. 1)[3].

Together, remorse, attributions of stability and empathy explain a substantial amount of variance in forgiveness (R^2 = .518). Remorse significantly predicts attributions of behavioral stability suggesting that when victims perceive an apology to be remorseful they also believe that transgression is unlikely to occur again. Supporting hypothesis one, attributions of stability significantly predict both empathy and forgiveness suggesting that when participants believed that a future offense was unlikely they felt increased empathy and were more willing to forgive the transgressor. Finally, increases in empathy predict increases in forgiveness.

The analysis thus far has focused on examining the fit of the hypothesized model; however, it is important to consider alternative configurations because it may be the case that equivalent models fit the data equally well (e.g., MacCallum & Austin, 2000). To further examine the adequacy of the hypothesized model, we examined an alternative configuration where emotional empathy precedes attributions of stability (exchanging the positions of attributions of stability and empathy from the hypothesized model). It may be the case that the level of perceived remorse in an apology directly influences people's experience of emotional empathy (not attributions of stability), which in turn influences their attributions of behavioral stability and willingness to forgive a transgressor. This model had poor fit, χ^2 (2, N = 170) = 30.79, p < .001, SRMR = .12, CFI = .85, and RMSEA = .29 (90% confidence limits .20, .38) AIC = 46.78 providing additional support to hypothesis one suggesting that attributions of behavioral stability influence emotional empathy in predicting forgiveness, not vice versa.

3.2. Mediation analysis

The mediation effects predicted by hypotheses two and three were tested using bootstrapping with bias corrected 95% confidence intervals (CI) in AMOS 17. Supporting hypothesis one, attributions of stability significantly mediated the relationship between remorse and empathy (Indirect Effect = .16, SE = .04, 95% CI, .08, .24) suggesting that attributions may be a mechanism by which perceived remorse increased emotional empathy. As predicted by hypothesis two, empathy significantly mediated the relationship between attributions of stability and forgiveness (Indirect Effect = −.20, SE = .04, 95% CI, −.31, −.13) suggesting that empathy may be one mechanism by which attributions of stability increased forgiveness. Additionally, there was a significant multiple mediation effect of remorse on forgiveness through both attributions of stability and empathy (Total Indirect Effect = .28, SE = .05, 95% CI, .18, .41) rendering the direct effect of remorse on forgiveness inconsequential. When considered in terms of the relatively good model fit described above, this multiple mediation effect provides support for our hypothesis three and suggests a potential integration of the empathy and behavioral stability models of the apology–forgiveness link.

4. Discussion

Attributions of behavioral stability and emotional empathy independently cause increases in forgiveness for a transgressor following an apology (Gold & Weiner, 2000; McCullough et al., 1997, 1998); however the relationship between these two mechanisms had previously been unexamined. Using recalled experiences with social transgressions occurring within romantic relationships, our analysis revealed that increases in remorse are associated with unstable dispositional attributions which in turn are associated with an increased likelihood of forgiveness directly and indirectly through increased emotional empathy for the transgressor. In other words, when a romantic partner apologizes with remorse, perceptions that they are unlikely to repeat the behavior increase both empathy and forgiveness. Conversely, unconvincing remorse increases the perceived likelihood of a repeat offense and decreases empathy and forgiveness. An alternative explanation, that feelings of increased empathy influences attributions of behavioral stability was not supported. These findings lay an empirical foundation for integrating both the empathy and attribution models of apologies and forgiveness and are the first to test hypotheses regarding the relationship between these mechanisms.

Transgressors who are forgiven are unlikely to repeat the offending behavior (Wallace, Exline, & Baumeister, 2008) and repeat offenses are associated with dramatic decreases in empathy, forgiveness, and a desire to maintain a relationship (Estepa et al., 2002). Perhaps a remorseful apology and corresponding forgiveness represent a social contract where the transgressor vows not to re-offend, leading to an experience of empathy and a motivation on the part of the relational partner to forgive the offense and continue the relationship. Although the model fit suggests attributions of stability precede emotional empathy, the causal relationship between these mechanisms needs to be investigated further. To better understand how apologies elicit forgiveness, it is important that future research examine the dynamic between these mediators within different relational contexts.

These data are contextualized within interpersonal romantic relationships where the transgressor offers some kind of apology; however, these patterns should generalize beyond romantic couples to any dyad where both parties have a mutual interest in a continued relationship. The central research that established the causal relations between these variables examined transgressions occurring in close relationships broadly (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997, Study 1: 52%; Study 2: 66% non-romantic partners) or general interpersonal relationships (Gold & Weiner, 2000). Recent data suggests that the structural relations among attributions of responsibility, repentance, sympathy and forgiveness remain constant across interpersonal relationship categories (i.e., coworker, friend and romantic partner; Eaton & Struthers, 2006). Although these variables are distinct from those tested here, they are conceptually similar enough to warrant tests of our model in other relationship contexts and in more applied settings. For example, a thorough understanding of the effects of stability attributions and emphatic concern on forgiveness may lead to practical advances for researchers interested in designing interventions to prevent relationship dissolution (e.g., McCullough & Worthington, 1994; McCullough & Worthington, 1995). Interventions that focus on increasing empathy as a means to increasing forgiveness may benefit from considering the role of attributions of stability. If the relational partner that committed the offense can successfully convince their partner of their remorse and their resolve not to

[3] The path analyses reported were conducted separately for men and women to examine any potential gender differences. No such differences were found; the overall patterns were the same regardless of the gender of the participants.

commit the offense again in the future, these interventions may be more effective.

The model tested here has a logical causal structure and other research has demonstrated these causal relationships experimentally (Gold & Weiner, 2000; McCullough et al., 1997); it should be clear that causal conclusions are not justified on these data alone. Future research will be needed to replicate these results using experimental methods. Furthermore, although these three variables together accounted for over half the variance in forgiveness, attributions of stability could only account for one tenth of the variability in empathy. Future research should consider other variables that predict both mediators. For example, it may be the case that increases in relationship commitment and duration predict increased empathy and decreased attributions of behavioral stability.

Overall, these data fill an important gap in the literature on apologies and forgiveness by establishing the relationship between two primary mechanisms and suggesting a model that integrates these effects. This research broadens our understanding of the complex processes involved in maintaining relational harmony following inevitable social transgressions and advocates for further investigation into integrating the empathy and attribution based perspectives on apologies and forgiveness.

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Appendix A

A.1. Items measuring

A.1.1. Attributions of stability

At the time they remorsefully apologized, how sure were you that your partner would not hurt you in the same way again?

At the time they remorsefully apologized, how much did you trust your partner not to repeat the bad behavior?

At the time they remorsefully apologized, how likely did you think it was that your partner would repeat the bad behavior in the future?

At the time they remorsefully apologized, how likely did you think it was that your partner would continue to engage in the bad behavior?

At the time they remorsefully apologized, how likely did you think it was that your partner's hurtful behavior would change in the future?

A.1.2. Empathy

Did you wish your partner well at the time they hurt you?

How moved did you feel towards your partner at the time they remorsefully apologized?

How concerned did you feel towards your partner at the time they remorsefully apologized?

How much sympathy did you feel for your partner?

How empathetic did you feel towards your partner at the time they remorsefully apologized?

A.1.3. Remorse

How believable was your partner's remorse when they apologized?

How much remorse did you think your partner showed at the time they apologized?

How much remorse did you think your partner felt at the time they apologized?

A.1.4. Forgiveness

At the time they remorsefully apologized, did you give up resentment towards your partner?

How much did you forgive your partner, at the time they remorsefully apologized?

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