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Better late than early: The influence of timing on apology effectiveness☆

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Abstract

Two studies examined whether the timing of an apology influences its effectiveness. We hypothesized that victims who received apologies later in a conflict would feel more satisfied with the resolution of the conflict, primarily because they would have more opportunity for self-expression and would feel better understood. Undergraduates provided retrospective interpersonal conflict narratives (Study 1) and responded to a hypothetical scenario (Study 2) in which they were wronged. The results showed that later apologies were more effective than earlier ones, and that this effect was mediated by feeling heard and understood. The ramifications for creating a "ripeness" or readiness for conflict resolution are discussed.

Apologies are the world's most basic and pervasive conflict resolution technique. Among marriage partners, friends, business associates, and nations, apologies attempt to right wrongs and wipe the slate clean, thus serving a crucial social lubrication role. In a sense, apologies are magical—they transform an act from something offensive into something acceptable (Goffman, 1971). In his classic work, *Relations in Public*, Goffman argued that through an apology "… an individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the [transgression] and affirms a belief in the offended rule." (Goffman, 1971, p. 113). The offender thus admits blame, but at the same time shows that he or she may be worthy of a second chance.

Research supports the notion that apologies achieve this transformation and thereby reduce or resolve interpersonal conflict. For example, Ohbuchi, Kameda, and Agarie (1989) found that victims had better impressions of an offender, felt less angry, and were less aggressive when they received an apology. And McCullough et al. (1998) found that apologies were associated with greater empathy for an offender, less avoidance and revenge among victims, and greater closeness between and offender and a victim. In the business domain, Goodwin and Ross (1992) found that apologies from companies enhanced consumers' satisfaction and the perceived fairness of responses to service failures.

But as we know from personal experience, all apologies are not created equal. What distinguishes a good apology from a poor one? Advice on giving apologies can be found in a wide range of sources, including etiquette manuals (Sugimoto, 1998), scholarly work on therapeutic practice (e.g., Mitchell, 1989) and practical guides on mediation and conflict resolution (e.g., Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994; Schneider, 2000). Two common issues that emerge from this work are timing and sincerity. For example, Rubin et al. (1994, p. 165) noted that

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"…if improperly timed or meant insincerely, an apology can arouse suspicion on the part of Other." Similarly, Mitchell (1989, p. 285) observed, "If an abbreviated apology is given immediately following a transgression, it may be perceived as superficial and insincere." Both of these statements suggest that although *what* someone says is important, *how* and *when* it is said will also influence an apology's effectiveness.

Given the importance of apologies, it is not surprising that so many people have tried to analyze what makes an apology effective. What is surprising, however, is how little *empirical* work underlies these analyses. Most research on apologies has simply demonstrated their general effectiveness. A few studies have examined characteristics of an offense (e.g., offense severity or offender responsibility, Bennet & Earwaker, 1994; Itoi, Ohbuchi, & Fukuno, 1996) that can influence an apology's effectiveness. However, most offenders cannot really alter the facts of a transgression they have already committed, and so they would probably be more interested in knowing what to say, and when and how to say it, once the deed is done. Scher and Darley (1997) and Darby and Schlenker (1989) carried out the only published studies of what makes an apology more or less effective. Both studies showed that offenders' expressions of remorse made apologies more effective. Scher and Darley (1997) also found that expressions of responsibility, promises of forbearance, and offers of reparation were helpful. Presumably, these variables all serve to make apologies seem more sincere.

Meanwhile, the role of timing in apology effectiveness has been ignored. Our research seeks to fill this gap. Research on timing as a factor in the effectiveness of apologies might have practical benefits, if it helped offenders to better heal the wounds they have caused. But it also has potential theoretical implications: Apologies are a way for one person to produce emotional change in another, a phenomenon that is fundamental to many interpersonal processes, including psychotherapy, conflict resolution, and social support. Understanding this phenomenon may thus clarify how negative emotions can be managed more productively.

What is the proper timing of an apology? To answer this question, we drew from work on conflict resolution. An apology is an attempt by one party (the offender) to de-escalate a conflict by creating a change in the victim (e.g., more forgiveness, less anger). People who study conflict resolution use the term "ripeness" to describe someone's readiness for conflict de-escalation (see Coleman, 1997; for a review and synthesis).

Thus, a victim's ripeness, or readiness to receive an apology, may be a key determinant of its effectiveness. An apology that is offered too early during conflict may pressure someone who is not ready for de-escalation. Furthermore, once an apology has been offered, the victim faces certain social constraints: We are supposed to forgive and forget, whether we are ready to or not (Bennet & Dewberry, 1994). This tension between the external social constraint and the victim's internal state may further limit the apology's effectiveness. As a colleague of ours once said to someone who offered an apology prematurely, "Don't apologize. I'm not done being mad at you." Ripeness takes time. Thus, one major hypothesis of our research is that apologies are more effective when they come later in a conflict.

Coleman (1997) argued that many affective, cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors influence whether someone is ripe for conflict resolution. We chose to examine the roles of voice and understanding in creating such readiness. Voice and understanding are associated with positive outcomes in a variety of contexts. For example, Lind, Kanfer, and Earley (1990) found that voice (the opportunity to express one's views) makes decisions seem more fair, even when someone's views have had no impact on the decision-making process. Similarly, Frantz and Janoff-Bulman (1999) found that when each party in an interpersonal conflict believes that the other party understands his or her point of view, both parties view one another more favorably.

Goffman's observation about how apologies work helps to explain why voice and understanding might be important. As he noted, apologies split the offender in two, and the transgression seems more acceptable if the victim believes in this split. Feeling heard and understood increases a victim's faith in the "good" part of the offender, by helping the victim to believe that the offender knows what he or she did wrong, and why it was hurtful to the victim.

Thus, victims may be more ready to accept an apology when they have a chance to express themselves and feel understood first. Apologies that are offered too quickly may not be effective, in part because the victim still feels unheard, and is not convinced that the offender knows what he or she did wrong, or why it was hurtful, or how hurtful it was. We therefore hypothesized that apologies that occur later in a conflict are more effective, primarily because victims are more likely to have expressed themselves, and thus feel better understood. These cognitive changes lead to a state of ripeness.

For obvious ethical reasons, experimental research on the role of apologies in meaningful interpersonal conflicts is difficult. Ohbuchi et al. (1989) actually committed a transgression against their participants in a laboratory experiment on apologies, but most other researchers have used hypothetical scenarios and role-playing (e.g., Scher & Darley, 1997) or retrospective accounts of transgressions from participants' lives (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998). Because each of these methodologies has its own strengths and weaknesses, both personal narratives and hypothetical scenarios were used in our research. In Study 1 we focused on meaningful real-life conflicts that

have high ecological validity and considerable emotional force. Study 2 focused on a conflict described in a hypothetical scenario. Its purpose was to replicate the main findings of Study 1, and establish causality, through an experimental design.

In both studies, we predicted that the later an apology came in a conflict scene, the more effective it would be. We also predicted that later apologies would be associated with greater feelings of voice and understanding, and that these effects would mediate the relationship between apology timing and outcome satisfaction.

Study 1

Method

Participants

Twenty-four volunteer undergraduates at Williams College (7 males, 16 females) were recruited to participate in a study on "Apology and Conflict." They received a candy bar for their participation.

Procedure

After providing their informed consent, participants received a questionnaire that contained all the instructions. First, they were asked to describe on a blank page "a recent conflict (within the last six months) you have had with another individual … in which you felt you were wronged, and also in which the other gave you an apology of some kind." After writing this description, participants reported how long ago the conflict occurred. Next, they read a list of typical, everyday conflict events (see Appendix A). This list was generated by a different sample of 15 undergraduates, who were asked to name events that "typically happen in a conflict." Participants ranked these events in the order that they occurred during the personal conflict that they wrote about previously (putting a 0 next to events that never occurred).

The list included several key events. The rank for the item "Other apologized to me" served as our measure of when an apology was received during each participant's own conflict. Ranks varied from 1 to 19, with higher numbers indicating that the apology occurred later in the conflict. The items "I believed Other understood my feelings and point of view," "Other showed non-verbally that s/he understood me," "Other said s/he understood my side," "Other asked questions to understand what I was saying," and "I recounted my grievances and stated my point of view" were used to create an index of how much voice and understanding each participant experienced. Each item was scored as either occurring (1) or not (0). These scores were summed to create an index, which varied from 0 to 5. Higher scores indicated that the victim felt heard and understood.[2]

Table 1
Study 1: Means, standard deviations, and correlations between independent, dependent, and mediating variables

Measure ($N = 23$)	Mean	*SD*	Correlations			
			1	2	3	4
1. Outcome satisfaction	7.10	2.34	—	.38*	.48**	−.45**
2. Timing of apology	6.74	3.02		—	.69**	.20
3. Voice/understanding	0.61	.36			—	.11
4. Severity of conflict	3.08	1.13				—

* $p < .07$.
** $p < .05$.

Respondents then went on to answer questions about how they felt now about the conflict they described. They rated how angry they remained, how well they felt the conflict had been resolved, and how much they had forgiven the offender, using 10 point scales (0 = not at all to 10 = completely). Negative items were reverse coded. These ratings were averaged into an outcome measure of present satisfaction with the conflict's resolution ($\alpha = .89$), which served as our dependent variable.

Finally, the participants were debriefed, thanked for their help, and dismissed. No one seemed to have guessed our hypothesis.

All the conflict descriptions were read and coded by two people who were blind to our hypotheses. They rated the severity of each transgression on a seven-point scale (1 = trivial to 7 = extremely severe). Coders were asked to focus on the initial transgression, not on how the victim or offender behaved afterwards. The ratings from both coders were averaged together to create a measure of conflict severity ($\alpha = .71$).

Results

Preliminary analyses revealed no significant gender effects of any sort, so that variable will not be discussed further. Means and standard deviations for the other variables are shown in Table 1. Table 1 also shows correlations that are key to testing our main hypotheses. Spearman's rho, a non-parametric measure, was used to calculate correlations involving apology timing, which was an ordinal variable. We first tested to see how conflict severity related to apology timing, voice and understanding, and outcome satisfaction. Conflict severity correlated negatively with outcome satisfaction, but did not correlate with the other variables. This suggested

[2] Whether voice and feeling understood occur before or after an apology is important. We assumed that they occurred before the apology, and in fact this was true for all but one of our participants, who was dropped from the analyses.

that it was not necessary to include conflict severity as a factor in tests of our hypotheses.

Our first hypothesis, that later apologies would be associated with more outcome satisfaction, was supported. Apology timing was positively correlated with outcome satisfaction; when the apology came later in the conflict, participants reported greater satisfaction. Our second hypothesis, that voice and understanding mediated this effect, was also supported. As Baron and Kenny (1986) noted, mediation occurs when a variable (voice and understanding) accounts for the relationship between the predictor (apology timing) and the dependent variable (outcome satisfaction). Because apology timing was an ordinal variable, we chose to test for mediation using a series of spearman's rho correlations and partial correlations, rather than the multiple regression procedure recommended by Baron and Kenny. Table 1 shows that apology timing correlated significantly with voice and understanding; later apologies were associated with higher levels of voice and understanding. Voice and understanding correlated significantly with outcome satisfaction; higher levels of voice and understanding were associated with higher levels of outcome satisfaction. Finally, when voice and understanding were held constant, the correlation between outcome satisfaction and apology timing disappeared, $r = .06$. Thus, the relationship between apology timing and outcome satisfaction can be explained by the mediating effect of voice and understanding.

Study 2

The results of Study 1 support our hypotheses. Because our results were correlational, however, the causal relations among the variables that we measured were unclear. For example, people who express themselves more often during a conflict may receive later apologies because they have annoyed the offender, or because all their talking kept the offender from apologizing earlier. If so, then voice affects the timing of apologies, rather than the other way around.

Because of these concerns, we ran a second study with a larger sample and an experimental methodology. In Study 2, participants read a hypothetical scenario in which they all experienced voice and understanding, but received apologies at different times. Some participants received an apology before feeling understood, some after feeling understood, and some never received an apology. This allowed us to test whether receiving an apology after voice and understanding indeed produces greater outcome satisfaction. We also wanted to compare those who received an apology to those who did not, to see whether any apology is better than none at all.

Method

Participants

In a single mass-testing situation, 83 undergraduates (35 males and 47 females) at Amherst College received extra course credit for participating in a study on "reactions to being wronged." They were told when they were recruited that the study involved responding to hypothetical conflict scenarios.

Procedure

After providing their informed consent, participants were asked to read about a hypothetical situation and urged to "try to imagine the described situations as clearly as possible, and answer all questions based on how YOU would feel if the same thing happened to you." All participants then read the same description of an event:

One Friday night, you were waiting in your dorm room for your friend Chris to get back from his baseball game. The two of you had made plans earlier in the week to rent a movie you had heard was really good, and later go to a party on campus. Chris was supposed to show up around 9 when he got back from the game with his team, but sometimes games ran a little later. At around 8:30 your roommates all left to go to an off-campus party and asked you to join them. It sounded like fun to you, but you knew you could not just break the plans you had made with Chris. You were ready at 9:00 and ended up waiting until 10:30, until it was clear that either something was wrong or he had forgotten. The next day, you learned from a mutual friend that Chris had been out partying from 8:30 on. You were angry, so you called Chris to talk to him.

Participants were given a blank space in which to write how they would feel, and asked to write "as if this had actually happened to you." Then, they rated seven emotion words (angry, understanding, frustrated, forgiving, satisfied, resentful, and irritated) to indicate how much they would feel each emotion. These ratings, which were made on seven-point scales (1 = Not at all to 7 = Very), were averaged together to create a single score that measured initial responses to the transgression ($\alpha = .88$).

Participants then read one of three different descriptions of the phone conversation that occurred the next day with Chris. These conversations were identical except for whether an apology occurred at the very beginning of the conversation, or after the participant had (hypothetically) voiced her concerns and received acknowledgement from Chris that her feelings were understood. In a third condition, participants received no apology at all.

In the later apology condition, for example, the participants read:

Table 2
Study 2: Change in feelings from Time 1 to Time 2

Condition		Time 1		Time 2		T1 vs. T2
	N	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*	*t*
Later apology	26	2.64	0.84	3.64	1.55	4.44**
Early apology	28	3.09	1.35	3.38	1.49	1.51
No apology	28	3.12	1.28	2.85	1.44	1.58

Note. There were no significant differences among conditions in feelings at Time 1.
** $p < .001$.

When Chris answered, you said "What happened last night? We had plans." You talked for a while, you telling about the party you eventually went to and Chris telling about the party he went to. You told Chris that you had waited for nearly 2 hours because you did not want to ditch Chris if the game had gone longer than expected. You told Chris that you had even skipped going to a party with a bunch of your other friends so that you did not break your plans with Chris. Besides, you added, Chris had forgotten other plans you had made in the past and that just made you more upset about the whole situation. Chris told you that he could understand why you were upset and that he himself would be upset in the same situation. Chris said "Sorry," and also explained that he had played horribly that day and his mind was still on the game when he got back to school. When he returned, he just wanted to go out and party to get his mind off the game, and he completely forgot the plans he and you had made earlier in the week. Then Chris said, "I've got to run to class. Talk to you later" and hung up.

Participants were given a blank space in which to write about their reactions to this conversation. Then they rated the same emotions are before, allowing us to create a single score measuring participants' final reactions to the transgression ($\alpha = .91$). Participants were also asked whether they had received an apology from Chris.

After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed, thanked for their help, and dismissed. No one seemed to have guessed the hypotheses.

Results

Responses to our question about the apology were analyzed to verify that participants correctly noticed and remembered this information from the scenario. Twenty-three participants, spread evenly across the three conditions, answered the question incorrectly.[3] The analyses reported below do not include their data (although including them did not substantially change the results).

[3] Although a 28% manipulation check failure rate may seem high, Oppenheimer and Davidenko (2002) have documented similar rates in other large group testing sessions.

Table 2 provides the means and standard deviations for all three conditions at Time 1 and Time 2. To test whether the timing of apologies affected changes in reactions to the transgression, responses were submitted to a 2 (gender) × 3 (apology condition) × 2 (time) mixed-design ANOVA. There were only three significant effects. First, there was a significant gender effect, $F(1, 53) = 5.44$, $p < .001$. At both times, women were less positive ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.04$) than men ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.37$), perhaps because the scenario involved a male friend, which may have connoted being stood up for a date.

There was also a main effect of time, $F(1, 53) = 6.63$, $p < .01$. Participants were generally more positive at Time 2 ($M = 3.38$), $SD = 1.64$ than at Time 1 ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.24$). However, this was qualified by an apology condition by time interaction, $F(2, 53) = 6.03$, $p < .001$.

Planned comparisons were conducted to determine whether the interaction effect supported our hypotheses. Changes in reactions from Time 1 to Time 2 differed significantly across all three conditions. Reactions improved most in the later apology condition, followed by the early apology condition, and then by the no apology condition (where reactions actually worsened). Improvement in the late apology condition was significantly greater than improvement in the early apology condition, $t(52) = 2.41$, $p < .05$, or improvement in the no apology condition, $t(52) = 4.50$, $p < .001$. And improvement in the early apology condition was significantly greater than improvement in the no apology condition, $t(54) = 2.18$, $p < .05$, where reactions actually became slightly more negative. However, participants who received an apology after voice and understanding were the only group whose reactions changed significantly from Time 1 to Time 2, $t(25) = 4.44$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

In Study 1, apologies that occurred later in a conflict were more effective, in the sense that they were associated with greater outcome satisfaction. There was also some evidence that voice and understanding mediate the relationship between apology timing and apology effectiveness.

In Study 2, we experimentally manipulated the timing of apologies, and replicated the results from Study 1. We found that a later apology, occurring after voice and understanding, was more effective than an early apology, occurring before voice and understanding. This suggests that the timing of an apology does matter, and that late is better than early. Not receiving an apology at all, even when there was voice and understanding, was worse than receiving an early apology. Thus, even an early apology is better than no apology—the words "I'm sorry" have a power of their own, even when circumstances are less than ideal.

Delayed apologies were thus more effective in both studies, probably because the victim had more time to feel heard and understood. Our results were obtained with two different methodologies. The high ecological validity of the real life conflicts used in Study 1 suggests that the results apply to meaningful conflicts, and the experimental design used in Study 2 establishes the causal role of apology timing in outcome satisfaction. Our research suggests that delaying an apology until after the victim has a chance to feel heard and understood may be the most effective way to right wrongs. Feeling heard and understood apparently fosters ripeness, a readiness to de-escalate conflict.

These results are also consistent with a recent literature review on the adaptiveness of expressing negative emotions (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 2001). Work on catharsis suggests that expressing anger often strengthens, rather than weakens, aggression, and anger (e.g., Bushman, 2002). However, other researchers (e.g., Pennebaker, 1997) have documented the benefits of self-expression. Kennedy-Moore and Watson (2001) resolve this contradiction in the literature by arguing that expressing negative feelings is adaptive when it leads to some form of resolution involving the source of distress. Giving voice to personal concerns, and eliciting understanding from an offender, should create these conditions. Communicating what bothered you is a way of reassuring yourself that an offender understands the rule that was broken, and eliciting that understanding before receiving an apology makes you feel more convinced that the offender will "do the right thing" in the future.

Before readers rush out and wait to apologize, however, several cautions are in order. Our research is only a starting point for investigating the factors that make apologies effective. More research is needed to be fully confident in our results. For example, the time frames that we examined were quite limited (within the last 6 months for Study 1, and within 24 h for Study 2.) The possible effects of long-delayed apologies are not yet known. Recent research suggests that some apologies are too late to be effective (Zilzer & Frantz, 2002). Thus, there may be a U-shaped function relating apology timing and outcome satisfaction—extremely early and extremely late apologies are likely to be ineffective. There are probably also occasions when an apology is ineffective no matter when it occurs.

Another limitation of our research is the way in which the hypothesized mediating variables were measured. Voice and understanding were not measured separately. This choice was influenced by practical considerations rather than theoretical ones; voice and understanding are clearly separate processes at the theoretical level. The narrative methodology that we used in Study 1 did not lend itself to such fine-grained analysis, because current feelings of being understood probably strongly influence memories about expressing one's viewpoint. In Study 2, too many cells would have been created by systematically varying the presence and absence of both understanding and voice, along with the timing of the apology. Future research should examine voice and understanding separately. Voice without understanding may be less beneficial than voice with understanding, and may in fact intensify feelings of anger.

We argued that ripeness leads to greater outcome satisfaction, but ripeness is a latent variable that cannot be directly measured. Many cognitive and emotional factors are involved in ripeness (Coleman, 1997), and these can be measured. However, few of them were measured here. For example, voice and understanding should strengthen a victim's belief that an offender will not commit the same offense again. Future research should measure this and other cognitive factors that might be influenced by the timing of an apology.

Emotions are more difficult to measure, yet they undoubtedly play an important role in ripeness too. For example, anger is an emotion with a time course, so ripeness ("I'm done being mad") may depend in part on anger subsiding. The methodologies used here did not allow us to explore this issue. We doubt that people can accurately remember the time course of their anger during past events, and responses to scenarios involve a hypothetical, rather than an actual time frame.

Many of these limitations could be overcome by studying ongoing conflicts. This might allow for the direct exploration of both a victim's ability to voice his or her concerns, and an offender's ability to convey understanding of the victim's viewpoint. The time course of such emotions as anger could also be measured.

Although we left many questions unanswered, our research provides an important first step towards understanding the factors that affect an apology's effectiveness. Letting someone first voice his or her concerns, and then assuring the person that these concerns are understood, may "ripen" the person for conflict de-escalation. More broadly, our research suggests that a fundamental first step toward changing emotions may be to acknowledge their existence. This is resonant with some psychological theories (cf. Carl Rogers' idea of unconditional regard) as well as many Eastern approaches to life (see Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

Appendix A. List of conflict events ordered by participants

Other interrupted me while I spoke.
I interrupted Other while s/he spoke.
Other asked questions in order to understand what I was saying.
Other showed non-verbally that s/he understood me.
I felt Other owed me an apology.
Other said s/he understood my side.
Other threatened me.
I threatened other.
Other stated his/her point of view.

I recounted my grievances and stated my point of view.
I believed Other understood my feelings and point of view.
I understood Other's feelings and point of view.
Other apologized to me.
I apologized to Other.
Other yelled at me.
I yelled at Other.
I said I wanted an apology.
Other insulted me.
I insulted Other.

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