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power and interpersonal relationships.**

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YOU'RE SORRY, BUT DO YOU REALLY CARE?:
APOLOGIES, POWER AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

A Thesis Presented

by

ALEXANDRA GUBIN

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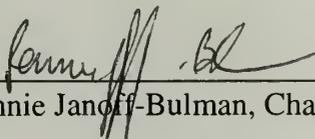
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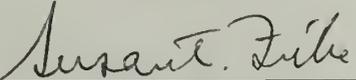
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DEDICATION

To my mother, Carol Beaudoin and my fiancé, Jim Propp

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	vii
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
I. SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH ON APOLOGIES	1
A. Apologies and Psychology	1
B. Sociological and Sociolinguistic Approaches to Apologies: Goffman	2
C. Beyond Goffman: The Current Research	6
II. STUDIES 1, 2 AND 3: DOES AN OFFENDER'S LACK OF POWER REDUCE APOLOGY POWER?	9
A. Introduction: Power and Apologies	9
B. Study 1	11
1. Method	11
2. Results	13
3. Discussion	14
C. Study 2	15
1. Method	15
2. Results and Discussion	16
D. Study 3	17
1. Method	17
2. Results and Discussion	18
E. Discussion of Studies 1, 2 and 3	20
III. STUDY 4: APOLOGIES AND CARING	21
A. Introduction: Taking Things Personally	21
B: Study 4	25
1. Method	25
2. Results and Discussion	27
IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	34
BIBLIOGRAPHY	39

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1: Strategies found in New Zealand corpus of apologies, adapted from Holmes (1990).....	4
2. Offense distribution in New Zealand corpus of apologies (1990).....	4
3. Reasons for apologizing.....	30
4. Themes in participants' theories of apologizing	33

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Mean expectation of apology by power – prescriptive wording.....	14
2. Mean expectation of apology by power – descriptive wording.....	17

CHAPTER I SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH ON APOLOGIES

A. Apologies and Psychology

Apologies are powerful tools. They allow us to soothe the sting of the hurts we inflict upon each other, to stitch together the torn tissue of our relationships, to heal emotional wounds. Yet, before and after the apology, we have still been stood up, or shouted at -- our property is just as broken and we are just as inconvenienced. Still, somehow the pain and annoyance of these offenses are mitigated or perhaps even eliminated by an apology.

Apologies are 'hot' in the '90s. President Clinton apologized to the Rwandan people for the United States' lack of intervention in the 1994 genocide. The Archdiocese of Boston apologized for the sexual abuse of children at the hands of priests. Even the queen of England got in on the act, apologizing to the natives of India for Britain's conduct as a colonial power. Within the past year, features on apologies have been included in BBC World Service news program and on the National Public Radio show *Marketplace*. Apologies and the offenses for which they are given are even the centerpiece of a new talk show, *Forgive or Forget*¹, in which friends and family who have transgressed against each other apologize for their offenses and ask forgiveness.

How do apologies work their magic? What is it about the utterance of the words "I'm sorry" that allows victim and offender to move on, perhaps even to draw closer? What factors strengthen or weaken an apology's ability to create reconciliation? And how is it that apologies backfire, despite our very best intentions?

This research sought to answer these questions. Despite their crucial importance in the social intercourse of daily life, apologies have received little research attention.

What research does exist has been conducted by sociologists and sociolinguists who have formulated a view of apologies not as tools for reconciliation with those we care about, but as tools for impression management within the larger society. The current research represents then, an attempt to enrich this important area from the point of view of social psychology. Before discussing the contribution we as psychologists can make to this area however, let us briefly review the literature that exists on apologies.

B. Sociological and Sociolinguistic Approaches to Apologies: Goffman

In his influential *Relations in Public* (1971), Goffman defines remedial work as either verbal or non-verbal behavior that might transform the meaning of an offensive act into an acceptable act. Goffman views the apology as a strategic division of the self of sorts; he states: “An apology is a gesture through which the individual splits himself into two parts, that part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule ... apologies represent a splitting of the self into a blameworthy part and a part that stands back and sympathizes with the blame giving is by implication, worthy of being brought back into the fold” (Goffman, 1971). In Goffman’s view, apologies are rituals serving to acknowledge the transgressor’s (1) violation of a social rule or norm², (2) respect for that norm, and (3) awareness of interpersonal obligations.

Such acknowledgments serve as a means for the transgressor to manage impressions of herself as someone who follows societal norms; though she apologizes to an individual, she does so to ensure that others do not draw incorrect generalizations about her behavior and her respect for norms. Thus, when I mistakenly cut in line at the bank, my apology implicitly states, “I know I broke the norm but please don’t judge me

to be an inveterate and unrepentant line-cutter – I am usually a good, norm-abiding citizen, just like you; I am committed to belonging to the group.” Judgments about our commitment to a social group are made on the basis of our adherence to social norms. We apologize to manage impressions of ourselves as people committed to the group and thus willing to follow its rules.

In addition to theorizing about the functions of apologies, Goffman also discusses their content. He proposes five components of apologies: (1) expression of embarrassment/chagrin, (2) acknowledgment of the transgressed norm, (3) verbal rejection of the transgression along with vilification of the self that so behaved, (4) embrace of the transgressed norm and/or promise of forbearance, and (5) restitution (Goffman, 1971).

In 1990, Holmes found empirical support for the use of these five elements in actual speakers' apologies. Analyzing a corpus of some 183³ naturally occurring apologies, Holmes found four broad apology strategies: (1) An explicit expression of apology, (2) an explanation or account, (3) acknowledgment of responsibility, and (4) promise of forbearance. Only one of Goffman's apology components does not appear in Holmes' framework, namely acknowledgement of the transgressed norm. It is possible that an implicit demonstration of one's respect for the norm suffices to fulfill Goffman's requirement of acknowledgement of the transgressed norm. Table 1 contains examples of each of Holmes' four strategies; Table 2 details distribution of offenses included in her corpus.

Table 1: Strategies found in New Zealand corpus of apologies, adapted from Holmes (1990)

Component	Example	Percent of times used in New Zealand Apology Corpus *
explicit expression of apology	<i>You bump into someone scattering her parcels on the ground</i> “I’m sorry” “Please forgive me” “I apologize”	60%
account	“I didn’t see you there” “I am in such a hurry”	23%
acknowledgment of responsibility	“My fault!” “I am so clumsy today” “I didn’t mean to do that” “You deserve an apology” “Can I help you pick up your parcels?”	15%
forbearance	“I won’t bump into you again”	2%

* Note: Since more than one strategy could be included in an apology, percentages in this table sum to more than 100.

Table 2. Offense distribution in New Zealand corpus of apologies (1990)

Offense Type	Example	Rounded Percent
Inconvenience	forgetting to pick someone up; awakening someone by mistake	39%
Space	bumping into someone; walking too close to someone	16%
Talk	interrupting someone; insulting someone verbally; mis-speaking	16%
Time	keeping someone waiting; arriving late for an appointment	14%
Possessions (including money)	spilling coffee on someone’s sofa; losing a book; neglecting to pay back a loan	11%
Social Gaffe	burping; speaking while eating	3%

Goffman’s outline of the components of apologies has borne ample empirical fruit (e.g. Holmes; CCSARP, 1989, cited in Scher and Darley, 1997), but does his theory that apologies serve to manage impressions also stand up to empirical test? Ohbuchi, Kameda

and Agarie (Study 1; 1989) sought to examine the effects of a confederate experimenter's apology to experimental subjects after committing a minor offense. Subjects in the apology condition rated the confederate as more sincere, responsible and careful. Regression analyses suggested that these more favorable ratings of the confederate inhibited later aggressive responses towards the confederate. Although the offense reflected poorly on the confederate's skills as an experimenter (the confederate repeatedly fumbled the use of lab equipment), subjects in the apology condition rated the confederate as a more competent experimenter than subjects who did not receive an apology. Rather than making the experimenter's error more salient, the apology *reduced* negative attributions about the experimenter's competence. This changed perception occurred despite the fact that the apology consisted solely of an acknowledgement that the confederate had made mistakes and an "I'm sorry!" Numerous other empirical studies offer evidence that apologies do successfully manage impressions, at least in adults (Ohbuchi, Kameda & Agarie, 1989; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Schlenker & Darby, 1989; Givens, Mills, Smith & Stack, 1994; Scher & Huff, 1991).

Apologies even manage impressions in children. Darby and Schlenker (1982) found that both fourth and seventh graders rated offenders who apologized elaborately as more likeable, more regretful for the offense, and less deserving of blame and punishment than offenders with less elaborate apologies. Similarly, second and third graders rated offenders who apologized as more sorry, less deserving of blame and punishment, having better motives and more likeable. A positive relationship appears to exist between elaborateness of apology and positive offender evaluations. This relationship appeared to hold for adults as well as children. In another scenario study the

authors varied the elaborateness of apology for an offense. The more apology components present in the apology, the more positively perpetrators were judged (Scher & Darley, 1997).

Further demonstration of the viability of the impression management view of apologies comes from a study that suggests that the more serious the transgression, the more complex an apology subjects will generate. In a scenario study (Schlenker and Darby, 1981), undergraduates were asked to imagine that they bumped into a stranger in either a mall or a school hallway. Actors' imagined responsibility for the collision and harm done to the victim were varied. Subjects' open-ended apology responses were coded; findings suggested that the more severe the consequences of the collision, the more elaborate the apology.

So, something of a dose response relationship appears to exist between apologies and impression management, for both children and adults. The more serious the offense, the more elaborate the apology; the more elaborate the apology, the more favorable victim impressions of the offender.

C. Beyond Goffman: The Current Research

While there is good empirical support for Goffman's theory that apologies serve to impression manage at a social group level, no empirical studies have been conducted on the psychological experiences of either the victim or the offender. As psychologists seeking to add to the work of sociologists then, we decided to flesh out the psychological and interpersonal realities of Goffman's model.

Apologies serve to heal relations with the person one has offended. An important way apologies effect this healing, we believe, is by demonstrating caring and valuing of

the victim, not of societal norms. Recent work on offenses and hurt feelings supports such a view. Leary and colleagues (Leary et al. 1995, Leary & Downs, 1995, 1998; Baumeister & Leary, 1995) have found that certain interpersonal offenses result in *relational devaluation*, defined as the perception that the victim's relationship with the offender is not as important, close or valued as she might like it to be. In this model of offenses and relationships, apologies might serve to reaffirm the offender's desire to be close to the victim.

Our model focuses on caring and reconciliation and so differs from Goffman's in a number of ways. First, we focus on the repair of the dyadic relationship, rather than the relationship with society as symbolized by the dyad. Growing from this interpersonal focus comes a focus on apologies as expressions of caring, rather than expressions of norm conformity. In addition to focusing "quantitatively" on the degree to which an apology sends its message, we focus "qualitatively" on the influence of features of the victim-offender relationship on the victim's understanding of the apology.

Each of the four studies in this thesis examines the relationship between caring and apologies. The first three studies use written scenarios to jointly test the hypotheses that (1) apologies show that the offender cares about the victim and (2) the victim 'controls for' features of her relationship to the offender in interpreting his apology. In order to more precisely examine the effects of apologies and power on caring in Study 3, we first tried to discover how the difference in power between an offender and a victim would affect expectation of apologies. The last study gathered first-hand, retrospective accounts of participants' apologies to friends and family with an eye toward gaining a better understanding of apologies in close relationships. In this case, we sought to (1)

find further support for the caring and reconciliation model and (2) simply describe apologizing behavior, given the dearth of information on this important topic.

CHAPTER II
STUDIES 1, 2 AND 3: DOES AN OFFENDER'S LACK OF POWER REDUCE
APOLOGY POWER?

A. Introduction: Power and Apologies

One way we chose to more closely examine how victims might 'control for' relationship variables in their perceptions of caring was through the lens of power. Power is a strong and ubiquitous force in relationships and one that has an impact on numerous cognitive and affective processes. By examining its impact on apologies and their interpretation, we can better understand how victims understand apologies.

Research on interpersonal power and impression formation suggests that because people want to have control over their outcomes, they attend carefully to those above them in hierarchies and less well to those below them (Fiske, 1993). Knowledge is power, after all; understanding your superiors may refine your ability to predict and influence their behavior. Because they have no power over us, we may pay relatively less attention to our subordinates. In keeping with diminished thinking about those below us may also come a diminished need to manage our relationships with them. We may guard less carefully against causing offense or hurting feelings. Conversely, in our attempts to maintain control over our fate, we may reserve our best behavior for those above us in the hierarchy, since they, after all, control what happens to us. Indeed, an analysis of a corpus of naturally occurring apologies suggests that apologies are more likely to occur when victims are high in power than when offenders are high in power (Holmes, 1990).

While those in power may be unaware of the increased cognition on the part of their subordinates, it is likely they are indeed aware of attempts at ingratiating behavior

on the part of those below them. It is entirely possible that the powerful take such motivation into account as they interpret their subordinates' behavior towards them. Conversely, subordinates may take into account the behavioral free hand of those in power above them as they seek to understand *their* behavior. Thus both superiors and subordinates form different attributions of a target's behavior as a function of that target's placement in the hierarchy (see Vonk, 1996).

Such ingratiation effects may influence our interpretations of apologies. More specifically, apologizing may be perceived as caring when a superior apologizes to a subordinate, and ingratiating when a subordinate apologizes to a superior. Does lack of power in an offender render his apology powerless? One of our research questions was: are ascending apologies (i.e. apologies to those above us in a hierarchy) discounted as ingratiation, and descending apologies (apologies to those below us in a hierarchy) given "extra credit"? Such a finding would support our hypothesis that victims take into account features of their relationship to the offender as they make meaning of the apology.

We sought to answer this question as well as examine the effects of apologies on caring more generally in Studies 1 to 3. Participants in each of these studies read a series of offense scenarios in which the presence of an apology and the power of the offender over the victim were systematically varied. To boost generalizeability, we included scenarios taking place in one of two domains: either the workplace or a social setting.

Scenarios were constructed to meet four preliminary apology criteria outlined by Fraser (1982). These criteria are that the speaker: (1) believes that she has committed an

act (2) believes that that act is reprehensible; (3) believes that she is responsible for the act and (4) regrets having committed it.

B. Study 1

It is likely participants' perceptions of apologies may be mediated by apologizing norms; that is, in addition to the discounting effects due to power, apologies that are more socially required may also "count less" as expressions of caring. The primary goal of Study 1 was to assess norms for apologizing operationalized as subjects' estimates of the likelihood that a subordinate or superior offender will apologize for an offense. We predicted that the greater the offender's power over the victim, the less expected would be an apology. Thus, ascending apologies should be more 'normal' than descending apologies.

1. Method

Subjects. Participants were 70 female⁴ undergraduate psychology students who completed questionnaires for course credit. Slightly over half of the participants (39) completed the questionnaire at the end of another unrelated experiment, while the remainder (31) completed the questionnaire only.

Procedure and stimulus materials. Participants read four scenarios in which one character (the offender) commits a minor offense against the other (the victim). As mentioned earlier, the relative power of the offender over the victim was varied such that the offender was either higher than, equal to or lower in power than the victim.

To ensure that participants did not guess the hypothesis of interest, power was manipulated between subjects; thus, each participant responded to a series of scenarios with either all high, all low or all equal power offenders. To ensure that no subject

thought that the offender had not apologized, each scenario ended directly following the offense. An ellipsis indicated that though no more of the story appeared on the page, the story had not yet concluded – presumably subjects then were under the impression that the prospect of an apology was still possible. Each scenario was followed by a series of questions assessing the appropriateness or subjective norms for apologizing.

Four questions had emerged in pre-testing of questions assessing subjective norms for apologizing. These were: (1) “How much do you think (offender’s name inserted here) _____ should apologize?” (2) “How big an apology do you think (offender’s name inserted here) _____ should offer?” (3) “How necessary is an apology in this situation?” and (4) “If you were in (victim’s name inserted here) _____ shoes, how much would you have expected an apology?” Participants rated each of these questions on a 10-point scale, in which low ratings represented low appropriateness and high ratings high appropriateness. To avoid order effects, the scenarios were counter-balanced.

Since we wanted to encourage use of power information in participants’ judgments about apology norms, the initial instructions emphasized to participants that power differences often influence interpersonal relationships. As a joint manipulation strengthener and check, early in each scenario participants judged which character, if either, had power over the other.

Results from a principal components analysis of the norm measures strongly suggest that Scenario 2 differed qualitatively from the other scenarios. While Scenarios 1, 3 and 4 loaded high on the first factor and low on the second, Scenario 2 showed exactly the opposite pattern, loading high on the second factor and low on the first. As the *highest* rating for Scenarios 1, 3 and 4 was .001 on factor 2 and the *highest* rating for any

Scenario 2 items was .282 on factor 1, we dropped Scenario 2 from all subsequent analyses.

2. Results

Manipulation Check. Almost all the participants perceived the power manipulation as they should have. Each of the 70 participants made 3 power judgments (one for each of the three scenarios); this made a total of 210 judgments. Slightly more than 84% of these were made correctly. Data were deleted on a scenario by scenario basis for those participants who misjudged power⁵.

Data Reduction. We calculated a measure of apology norm by taking the mean of the apology norm items across scenario. This composite norm variable served as the dependent variable for all subsequent analyses in this study.

Underdog Identification. We predicted that when the offender was lower in power than the victim (ascending apologies), an apology would be more expected than when the offender was higher in power (descending apologies).

In fact, we found almost the opposite pattern! As Figure 1 demonstrates, apologies appear to be *more* expected when the offender is high in power, and *less* expected when the offender is low in power. A two-way between subjects ANOVA with power (high, equal, low) and administration method (questionnaire-only, questionnaire at end of an unrelated experiment) as between-subjects variables and apology norm as our dependent variable, yielded a significant effect for power $F(2,63) = 3.23 p < .05$. Post hoc tests revealed that the low and equal groups were significantly different $p = .05$, as were the low and high groups $p < .008$.

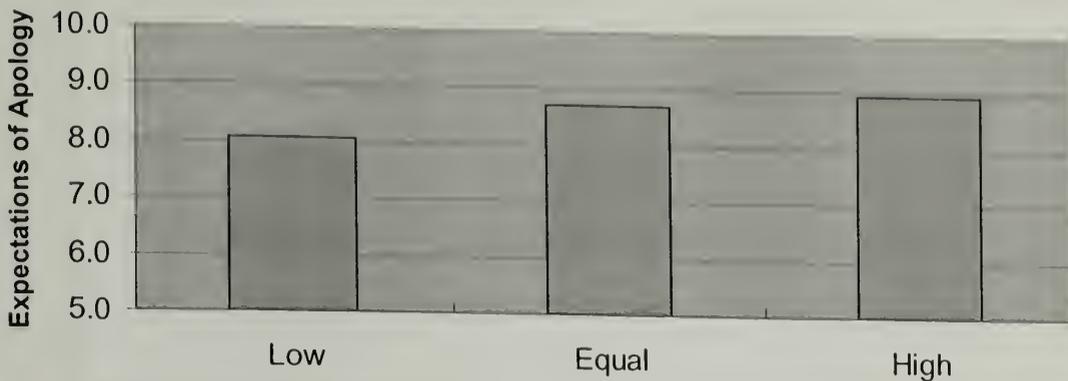


Figure 1: Mean expectation of apology by power - prescriptive wording

3. Discussion

Our data suggest that we expect apologies *more* from those above us in the hierarchy than those below us. This finding is counterintuitive, flying in the face of both common sense and previous empirical work on apologies suggesting that ascending apologies are much more frequent than descending ones (Holmes, 1990).

A re-examination of our questionnaire suggested a likely explanation for the apparent reversal of this norm. The language of our questionnaire suggested that participants may have reported not what generally *did* happen but what they felt *should* happen; that is, our questionnaire elicited prescriptive norms, rather than descriptive norms.

UMASS undergraduates are by and large an underdog-identifying lot. Given what they implicitly perceived as the opportunity to express their views on the way power relations should work, they may have “created” a world in which those low in power are treated perhaps more respectfully than they are in reality. Relatedly, UMASS undergraduates may be biased toward hierarchy attenuation and so have taken this opportunity to attenuate hierarchy in apologizing norms.

Alternatively, this finding may be an artifact of participants' ideas about the responsibilities that come with power. Perhaps high power offenders are expected to apologize more because they are viewed as relatively more responsible for the situations in which they end up committing an offense.

We were sufficiently puzzled by this “underdog” finding to run another study (Study 2) assessing whether the norms participants had reported were descriptive or prescriptive. In Study 2, we administered a scaled-down, revised version of our questionnaire to a convenience sample of undergraduates. While the original questionnaire investigated how much the offender should apologize, the revised questionnaire investigated how much the offender *would* apologize.

We predicted that ascending apologies would be more normative than descending apologies. We also predicted a significant interaction between questionnaire wording and power in the combined data set.

C. Study 2

1. Method

Subjects. Participants were a convenience sample of 60 male and female undergraduates (35 women and 25 men), approached in dorms, classroom buildings and the student center. Following completion of the questionnaire, participants were offered a piece of candy.

Procedure and stimulus materials. The stimulus materials in Study 2 differed from those used in Study 1 in four ways. First, the word ‘should’ was replaced with the word ‘will’ to elicit information about participants’ descriptive rather than prescriptive norms. Second, to shorten the questionnaire, Items 3 and 4 were dropped. Third,

Scenario 2 was not included and fourth, scenarios were administered in the same order for all participants – 1, 3 and then 4.

2. Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. Each of the 60 participants made 3 power judgments (one in each scenario); making a total of 180 judgments. Exactly 80% of these were made correctly. Data were deleted on a scenario by scenario basis for those participants who misjudged power⁶.

Data Reduction. We took as our dependent variable the mean of the 2 items (“How much do you think she will apologize?” and “How big an apology do you think she will offer?”) across scenario.

Power effects. We predicted that ascending apologies would be more normative than descending apologies once we changed the wording of our questions to elicit descriptive rather than prescriptive norms. This is exactly what we found. As Figure 2 demonstrates, when participants reported on what they believed *would* happen rather than *should* happen, they reported high apologizing for low power offenders and low apologizing for high power offenders, $F(2,55) = 7.54 p < .01$. A 2 x 2 ANOVA with wording (descriptive or prescriptive) and power (high, equal, low) as between-subjects variables revealed a significant interaction $F(2,121) = 11.62 p < .001$. These findings support our hypothesis that norms for apologies are indeed affected by interpersonal power, such that high power offenders are expected to apologize less than low power offenders.

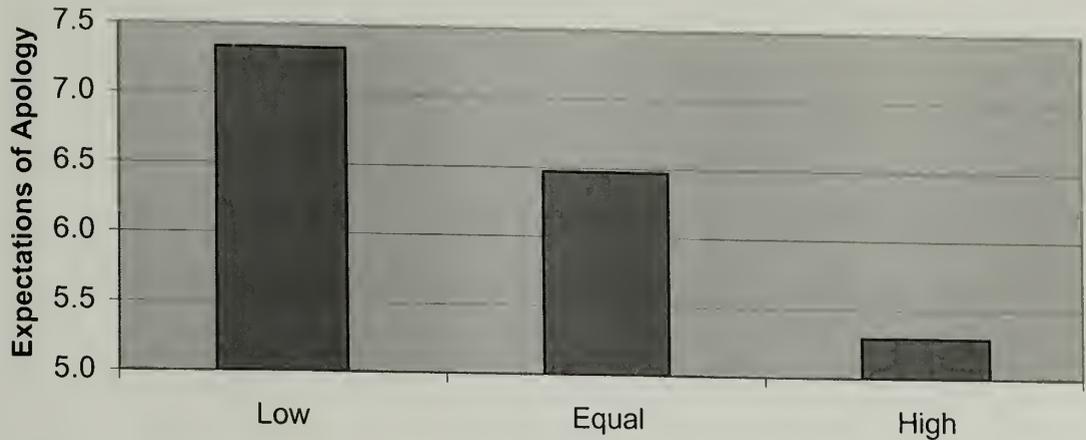


Figure 2: Mean expectation of apology by power – descriptive wording

D. Study 3

In Study 3, we used a 2 (apology or no apology) by 3 (low, equal or high power) between-subjects design to test the hypotheses that (1) apologies show that the offender cares for the victim and (2) ascending apologies will be perceived as demonstrating less caring than descending apologies.

1. Method

Subjects. Participants were 140 female undergraduate psychology students who completed questionnaires for course credit.

Procedure and stimulus materials. Participants read Scenarios 1, 2, 3 and 4 with the addition of a paragraph or two that described the conclusion of the interaction. In half of the scenarios, the offender apologized for her offense in this conclusion and in half she did not. Although Scenario 2 was administered, it was removed from the analysis as discussed above.

Participants rated the degree to which the offender cared about, liked, valued, and wanted closeness with the victim, as well as the degree to which the offender cared about

her relationship with the victim. All of these items were assessed on a 10-point scale anchored at 1 (not at all) and 10 (very much). To create a measure of offender caring for victim, we averaged across scenario participants' ratings of the degree to which the offender: cared about, liked, valued, wanted closeness with, and cared about her relationship with the victim. The resulting composite score ($\alpha = .92$) served as our measure of perceived offender caring for victim.

2. Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. Again, most of the participants perceived the power manipulations as they should have. Each of the 140 participants made 3 power judgments (one in each scenario); this made a total of 420 judgments. About 84% of these were made correctly. Data were deleted on a scenario by scenario basis for those participants who misjudged power⁷.

Caring effects. We had predicted that apologizing offenders would be perceived as caring for the victims more than non-apologizing offenders; this is precisely what we found. Apologizing offenders received a mean rating of 4.2 on our caring variable, while non-apologizing offenders received a mean rating of 3.6 $F(1,131) p < .01$. Apologies show caring.

Our predictions related to the effects of power and apologies on perceptions of caring did not find similar support. The reader will recall that we predicted ascending apologies would be perceived as demonstrating less caring than descending apologies. We did not find this effect, as the interaction between power and apology was not significant. In fact, an examination of the means suggests that an opposite pattern may hold -- low power apologizers received higher caring ratings ($M = 4.79$) than equal power

apologizers ($M = 4.0$) who received higher caring ratings, in turn, than high power apologizers ($M = 3.8$).

Examining the main effects of power on caring may shed some light on these findings. According to our participants, whether or not an apology is offered, powerful offenders are perceived as caring less for their victims than low power offenders $F(2,131) p < .05$. (Post hoc tests revealed that this effect was driven by the difference between the low and high means $p < .01$). One might speculate that since low power offenders are already perceived as quite caring, they are not expected to apologize as much as less caring, high power offenders. Since low power offenders are not expected to apologize as much, their apologies are worth relatively more.

Another explanation is that participants' hierarchy-attenuating biases shaped their apology norms. If participants hold that apologies are more expected of high power offenders than low, then it follows that low power offenders would get particular credit for apologizing, while high power offenders would get relatively less.

A final explanation is suggested by work on impression formation heuristics and stereotyping. Participants were not given a great deal of individuating, personal information about the characters – and thus it is likely impressions formed of the characters were based on their roles (e.g. boss, employee). Roles may determine stereotype content and since low power offenders are (by definition) subordinate, they may be perceived as weak (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990). Several traits often are associated with the subordinate stereotype – importantly for our purposes, the trait of “niceness”. Participants' higher caring ratings for low power offenders may be a

function of their use of this stereotype and perceptual assimilation (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

In sum, then, our third study found support for our hypothesis that apologies show caring. We did not find support for the hypothesis that descending apologies would be perceived to demonstrate less caring than ascending apologies. It is possible that the lack of support for this latter hypothesis reflects not the weakness of the interaction but the very power of apologies. As we will discuss below, perhaps the effect of the apology was sufficiently powerful to override the effects of power.

E. Discussion of Studies 1, 2 and 3

Our hypothesis that apologies show caring was supported while our hypothesis that ascending apologies would be perceived as demonstrating less caring than descending apologies was not. Although we saw in Studies 1 and 2 that the norms for high and low power offenders clearly differed, these differences did not appear to translate themselves into differences in interpretation of caring. This suggests that victims may not “control” for offender power in their interpretation of apologies. We did not therefore find support for our hypothesis that victims ‘control for’ features of their relationship to the offender in interpreting apologies.

Alternatively we believe that it is possible that the effects of apologies overrode the effects of power. Apologies may signal a sort of implicit, interpersonal “time-out” outside of normal judgments about social conduct. It is because apologies represent a sacrifice -- because they are so personal -- that they are so powerful. Perhaps the effects of this proximal, interpersonal variable (i.e. apologies) reduced those of those of the more distal, social structural variable, power.

CHAPTER III

STUDY 4: APOLOGIES AND CARING

One of the goals of this research was to test the hypothesis that apologies show that the offender cares about the victim. Our final study, Study 4, afforded us the opportunity to find further support for a caring and reconciliation model of apologies, as well as to explore how apologies function in close relationships.

A. Introduction: Taking Things Personally

For most of us, apologies to those we hold near and dear play much more important roles in our lives than those made to strangers. If apologies express caring in relationships between strangers, it is entirely likely such an effect might be magnified in relationships between intimates⁸.

Study 4 sought to elucidate the role of apologies between intimates. We believed Goffman's model would not be well suited to explain apologies in this domain. First, since by definition intimates have long-standing relationships with each other, impression management may not be as important as it is in relations between strangers. Indeed, in close relationships we may apologize even when we know the victim's impression of us will *not* be changed by our offense.

Second, Baumeister points out that guilt is proportional to intimacy (Baumeister, 1997). While one may not feel particularly guilty for transgressing against strangers, one *does* feel guilty for transgressing against a loved one. Subjects asked to report on an incident for which they felt guilty overwhelmingly reported offenses involving friends, romantic partners and family (Baumeister, Reis, & Delespaul, 1995).

Third, often when we transgress against intimates, we feel their pain empathically, while when we transgress against strangers, we generally do not (Baumeister, 1997;

Davis, 1996). Fourth, we hurt the ones we love, as the saying goes. By and large in the social intercourse of daily life, transgressions against intimates tend to be more serious than those against strangers. Serious offenses may require entirely different sorts of apologies than less serious offenses. In sum, intimate relationships may be characterized by a decreased need for impression management, an increased sense of empathy and guilt upon transgressing, and a capacity for more serious offenses.

Now let us consider how apologies might function as reconciliation tools between intimates. Just as apologies in public serve as implicit statements of our commitment to the social group, so do apologies to intimates serve as implicit statements of our commitment to them. Just as we strive to observe societal norms, so we also strive to observe norms in our relationships with others, what we are calling “*relational*” norms. Relational norms are the silently negotiated rules about how the relationship should proceed. They are the rules determined by the twosome. Examples of relational norms might be ‘Both of us share childcare in this relationship’ or ‘We always return each other’s phone calls within a day.’ While there is some variability in our interpretations of societal norms, there is much greater variability in our interpretations of relationship norms. For instance, we may hug one friend hello while we shake hands with another – equally close – friend. Differences in relational norms can spell trouble when two individuals have different norms; for instance, one spouse might think daily phone contact is in order when the two are apart, while the other might expect contact every other day.

Should our friend Mary break several of our relationship norms – say she does not promptly return phone calls and does not invite us to her party – we speculate that she

may not value us or our relationship. As detailed above, recent work on hurt feelings supports such a process. According to this work, evolutionary pressures created in humans a need to belong – to form stable and satisfying bonds with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). So important is this need, that its fulfillment is monitored by a ‘sociometer.’ The sociometer scans the social environment for signs of rejection/relational devaluation. If such cues present themselves, the sociometer alerts the individual to the threat via negative affective responses (hurt feelings). We explained earlier that we propose apologies interrupt this process of relational devaluation by showing caring.

We believe there are three levels at which apologies interrupt relational devaluation. At the ‘you’ level, saying that you are sorry someone has had an experience means quite literally that you are saddened by their pain. (The translation of the word “sorry” in Spanish is *lo siento*— which literally means “I feel it”. In English, the word ‘sorry’ is closely related etymologically to the word ‘sore’.) Telling someone that you are sad that they are hurt *shows caring*.

At the ‘us’ level, apologies show caring because (at least when they are sincere) they represent clear and unambiguous attempts to repair a relationship. Trying to repair a relationship shows that you care about it.

At the ‘me’ level, apologies show caring because they are often hard to do and as such constitute a sacrifice. Apologies entail first a private recognition and then a public admission of one’s own flaws. This is a painful, self-esteem diminishing experience. When we apologize, we are implicitly placing the well-being and emotional needs of our victim *before* our own need for positive mood and self-esteem. Such a sacrifice

demonstrates the offender's valuing of the victim and their relationship. The admission of fallibility is all the more powerful for its being made to a person who may well be angry at the offender and so likely to attack (or at least agree vociferously) with the admission.

This notion of apology-as-sacrifice dovetails nicely with the literature on forgiveness. A psychological definition of forgiveness is the relinquishment of the moral debt owed a victim by a perpetrator (Enright et al., 1996). Perhaps in the unconscious currency of social interaction, the sacrifice of one's own self esteem needs might in some way repay a moral debt^{9,10} owed a victim. Such a notion certainly fits well with the sociometer hypothesis. The reduction of the offender's self-esteem is met by a voluntary reduction in the self esteem of the victim.

An important implication of this apology-as-sacrifice notion is that apologies only work to the extent that the offender takes responsibility for the offense and the negative repercussions it has on the victim. The acceptance of responsibility distinguishes apologies from excuses. "I didn't mean to step on your toe, I was jostled by someone else" is an excuse, while "I am sorry I stepped on your toe, sometimes I can be quite clumsy" is an apology.

The excuse literature defines excuses as remediating strategies that function by shifting causal attributions for an offending act from one source to another. Growing as it does out of the attribution literature, much of this work focuses on the ways in which excuses alter attributional analyses of victims. For instance, Weiner, Amirkhan, Folkes and Verette (1987) found that excuses for breaking a social contract tend to be: (1) external to the offender, (2) uncontrollable, and (3) unintentional (e.g. "my car broke

down”), while the “real reasons” for offending behavior are internal, intentional and controllable, (e.g. “I didn’t feel like going”). This line of research suggests that excuses are effective strategies for managing others’ impressions of offenses and so reducing anger towards offenders.

Most people after being the victim of one offense or another have had the maddening experience of being told by the perpetrator, “I’m sorry you *feel that way*.” Such a statement, by our definition, is not an apology because the person has not admitted *responsibility* for the pain the victim is experiencing. Similarly, a statement such as “I am sorry your mother died” would not constitute an apology, since the offender (one would hope) has not committed an offense¹¹.

In sum then, we believe that apologies function to heal breaches in relationships. They may do this at any one of three levels: by expressing empathic discomfort, by implicitly stating a willingness to continue the relationship and by sacrificing the offender’s own esteem needs for those of the victim.

The goals of Study 4 were: (1) to find support for the caring and reconciliation model and (2) to describe apologizing behavior. To accomplish these objectives, we designed an hour-long, largely open-ended questionnaire asking participants a variety of questions about apologies in general as well as quite detailed questions about what happened the *last* time they apologized.

B: Study 4

1. Method

Subjects. Participants were 189 male and female undergraduates (47% female and 52% male) who received extra course credit for participating.

Measures. Participants completed a 9 page questionnaire about the ease and frequency with which they apologized, their beliefs about how apologies function in interpersonal relationships and what happened the *last* time they apologized to someone they knew. Sample items included: “ Please give a detailed account of what you said/did that offended the other person. What exactly did you do? If you offended the other person by saying something, what exactly did you say?”, “What led you to apologize?”.

Procedure. Participants were run in groups of 2 to 10. To encourage participants to describe the incident as comprehensively and thoughtfully as possible, the experimenters gave participants individualized attention. Each participant was greeted at the door by an experimenter who introduced him or herself and explained the topic under investigation.

Participants were urged to give as much information as they could about their experiences apologizing, given the absence of other research on this topic. To increase participants’ feelings of anonymity and security, the experimenter also directed each participant to seal the completed questionnaire in a business-sized envelopes, to write “apology project” over the seal and to drop the questionnaire into the top slot of a closed cardboard box.

We believe this approach yielded good quality data in the form of thoughtful and complete responses. Counting the words of a random sample of the data yielded an average count of 92 words per question, though averages for some questions were as high as 157 words. Numerous participants wrote about rather personal matters and many reported surprisingly reprehensible offenses such as disclosing confidential information about a friend’s sex life, stealing from a best friend and then denying the theft and being

arrested for driving under the influence while on the way to vandalize an ex-girlfriend's house. Such candor reduced our concerns about social desirability biases.

2. Results and Discussion

To whom did participants apologize. Some 90% of apologies were made to either a friend, boyfriend or girlfriend, spouse or family member. The mean number of years the participants had known victims was 6; the modal number of years was 2.

There were not enough apologies between non-intimates to analyze power differences in apologies. (We assume here that intimacy brings with it a certain leveling of power differences.) However, taking age as a proxy for power may allow us to examine power issues with a broad brush. Of apologies between people of different ages, 60% were to victims *older* than the offender, while only 40% were to victims younger than the offender. To the extent that we accept age as a proxy for power, our research supports the view that ascending apologies occur more often than descending apologies.

We did find one marked gender difference. While women apologized about equally to men and women, men apologized disproportionately to women ($\chi^2 = 5.16$, $p < .05$). There are a number of factors that might drive this 'apology gap'. Apologies often involve taking on a vulnerable, one-down status, albeit temporarily; men may feel more comfortable doing this with a woman than with a man. Interestingly as men and women apologized in equal amounts to friends and lovers, it does not appear this difference is a function of a difference in the sorts of people to whom men and women choose to apologize. We might speculate somewhat pessimistically, that men treat women with disrespect more often than they treat men with disrespect. Alternatively, women might be more exacting in their close relationships than men. Thus, women, who

generally tread carefully in their relationships do not offend other women, while their less relationship-focused brothers do.

For what sorts of events did our participants apologize? Two coders read through each of the questionnaires, abstracting and categorizing the accounts of offenses. Intercoder reliability was .89. What we called ‘practical offenses’ made up some 21% of the events for which people apologized. Practical offenses were rather impersonal offenses, including such things as: inconveniencing someone (e.g. by oversleeping or forgetting to run an errand), *accidentally* giving someone a minor physical injury (e.g. during sports), bumping into someone or offending against property (e.g. breaking someone’s knickknack or not returning a borrowed Walkman). What we called ‘relational offenses’ made up about 43% of the data. Relational offenses are offenses in which feelings are hurt – they are offenses that people take quite personally and whose occurrence may reflect on the relationship. Examples of relational offenses include: lying, deliberately striking someone, teasing, and being sharp. The remainder of the offenses (21%) could not be fit into this coding scheme.

Women apologized significantly more for relational offenses than for practical offenses, while men apologized about equally for both types of offenses. In fact, for men the ratio of relational to practical apologies was 50:50, for women it was 80:20. This is in fact consistent with research that women think more and think harder about relationships than men (Samuels, 1998; Jordan, 1992). The offenses that women notice and attend to have largely to do with relationships, while those that men notice have equally to do with relationships and more straightforward, mundane concerns.

Ease and frequency of apologies. Apologies are apparently an integral part of most people's lives. Our participants reported apologizing relatively often – on average of once or twice a week. We assessed participants' ease of apologizing with four Likert-type questions at the beginning of our questionnaire. These questions were answered on a 7-point scale, where a high score meant easy to apologize. After reverse scoring the negatively worded items, we averaged respondents' answers to create a composite ease of apology score ($\alpha = .76$). Participants reported apologizing fairly easily; the mean composite score was 4.8, almost 1 scale degree to the right of the midpoint of our 7-point scale. No gender differences existed for either ease or frequency of apologies.

Relationship 'recovery' and apology acceptance. Two coders assessed the 'recovery' of the relationship following the apology as well as victim's acceptance of the apology. Inter-rater reliability was .87. Approximately 19% and 15% of cases could not be coded for recovery and acceptance respectively as sufficient post-offense information was not available.

The bulk of relationships, approximately 71%, made a quick and complete recovery; 20% made a complete recovery though over several weeks or months while close to 9% remained troubled at the time of questionnaire administration. The pattern of apology acceptances was similar, though not identical to recovery – 84% of apologies were accepted and 16% were rejected.

Several participants reported coming to new and deeper understandings of themselves, their victims, and their relationships as a result of apologizing. Such 'reconciliation' apologies were typified by apologies on the part of both the offender *and*

the victim, a searching, non-judgmental discussion of how the offenses were brought about and how they might be avoided in the future.

One participant stated:

“If I had not apologized, our situation never would have improved ... I never would have been able to admit and come to terms with my unhappiness in Massachusetts. I would not have gotten the chance to talk seriously about this with him and discuss what I could do to increase my happiness.”

Reasons for apologizing – The superegos have it. Two coders read through each of the questionnaires, coding reasons for apologizing. Intercoder reliability was .80. The most frequently mentioned categories are tabulated in Table 3.

Table 3. Reasons for apologizing

Category	Example	Percent mentioning
Did wrong	“I’d done wrong.” ; “I broke a promise.” ; “I had been harsh.”	28
Soothe Victim	“I wanted to make her less mad”; “I wanted to make her feel better”	25
General concern about victim’s pain	“I felt so bad I had hurt her” “ I realized she felt awful”; “I made her feel so bad”	24
Guilt Relief	“If I hadn’t apologized, I would have felt like shit”; “I felt horrible for my actions”	22

N.B. Participants could answer more than once, so percentages do not sum to 100.

Some 40% of the participants stated that they apologized either to reduce guilt or simply because they had done wrong¹². Such findings suggest that apologies may serve as impression managers for the self as much as for other people. Indeed, a very small minority of participants actually reported pride in their apologies. Said one, “When I was done, I felt good that I had said what I said because I meant it, for it was not out of anger or frustration, but out of reason.”

Consistent with the 'you' level of expression of caring, numerous participants stated that seeing the victim upset was painful to them. Said one participant, "I felt sad when I was apologizing. I was upset because I had made him upset."; said another, "I didn't like seeing him so stressed out and I wanted to make him feel better." A participant who had yelled at his friend at a party stated, "I saw my friend two days later and realized how he had been hurt and scared by my reaction. I felt horrible about this."

Many participants gave answers consistent with the 'us' level of expression. Indeed, a third of participants stated they apologized either to reduce conflict in the relationship or because they were worried they would lose the relationship. There is certainly a factual basis for the fear of losing relationships. About 25% of the participants reported that they believed their relationship with the victim would have ended had they not apologized.

Interestingly, one of the most striking things about the reasons participants gave for apologizing was their focus on emotion. Most of the participants framed their discussions of apologizing in terms of emotions, e.g. "She felt so bad"; "I hate fighting"; "I hate it when other people don't apologize." Such emotion-focused cognition contrasts with the more logical, impression-management model.

Emotions while apologizing – Is it worth it? Participants reported on the emotions they remembered experiencing while apologizing and then after. About 40% reported feeling either sad, angry or fearful during their apology. Participants who were fearful generally feared that the victim's reaction might be a refusal to reconcile. Participants who felt sad generally were disappointed in themselves and/or felt sad that their victims were hurt.

A number of participants reported feeling emotions associated with the offense more intensely while apologizing. For instance, a participant who had been embarrassingly rude to her friend felt embarrassed again while apologizing; the participant who apologized for angrily refusing to lend his mooching roommate money for soda felt angry again when he apologized; the participant who had stolen from her friend and then lied about it, felt very guilty again when she apologized.

Apologizing, then, is no piece of cake. It often brings about an increased awareness of one's own fallibility and weaknesses of character. It makes one feel sad. Apologizing represents a sacrifice of one's own self-esteem needs to the relationship and to the other. As discussed earlier, such a sacrifice can show caring. Many participants articulated precisely this view:

I think that in relationships apologies show how much you care. Anybody can do something wrong, but when you apologize for it you really feel as if you hurt somebody.

Apologies show the other person that you care about him or her enough to let them know that you can acknowledge that you have been wrong in some way or have hurt their feelings.

Apologies in relationships break down the barrier of one's pride. If a person is able to admit that they were wrong to the person that they have wronged, they put pride and many other factors (such as embarrassment, guilt, etc) aside in an effort to correct the situation. Apologies make a relationship a whole lot stronger.

Participants' lay theories of apologizing. Participants reported what they thought the functions of apologies in relationships were. These answers are again consistent with

our model of caring and reconciliation. The six themes most commonly mentioned appear in Table 4.

Table 4. Themes in participants' theories of apologizing

Theme	Frequency	Percent
• Apologies show that you were wrong/at fault	74	39%
• Apologies help to heal hurt feelings	49	26%
• Apologies show caring for relationships	30	16%
• Apologies can be used to make peace/settle a conflict	27	14%
• Apologies must be sincere to work	22	12%
• Apologies show you respect the victim	10	5%

N.B. Several participants mentioned more than one theme, so percentages do not sum to 100.

Almost all of the functions participants reported involved caring. A full 16% of people *explicitly* mentioned that apologies show caring for the victim, the relationship and/or the impact of the offender's actions on the victim. Two of the other themes – “apologies help to heal hurt feelings” and “apologies can be used to settle conflict” also demonstrate caring as they fit squarely into the province of relationship repair. When all was said and done, a full 63% of the participants either stated outright or implied that apologies show caring for victims.

CHAPTER IV GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

We sought in this research to flesh out the psychological realities of the impression management model of apologies and to extend this model into the realm of intimate relationships. Our principal hypothesis, related to the caring and reconciliation model of apologies, has been that apologies create reconciliation with others by showing offender caring for the victim. We found support for this hypothesis in both the scenario study assessing participants' ratings of how much offenders cared for victims and also in self-reports in the open-ended study.

In addition to managing impressions in larger society, our research suggests apologies also function to repair relationships between people. We did not find support for our second hypothesis, at least as it was operationalized – that victims may take into account features of their relationship with the offender in interpreting apologies. However, we speculate that the very power of apologies to communicate caring may have overridden this effect. Precisely because they are so hard to offer, apologies express interpersonal caring. The participants mentioned repeatedly how important they believed apologies to be in their daily lives. Perhaps apologies at the interpersonal level were more powerful than the effects of power at the social structural level.

There are several weaknesses in this research. All four studies can be criticized for their poor external generalizability. Scenarios are of course a weak substitute for actual social interaction, while retrospective questionnaire studies are subject to social desirability biases, memory distortions, etc. Each of the studies used UMASS undergraduates -- hardly a representative sample of people living in the US, or even Massachusetts.

Logistically, the open-ended study required many hours of work for many people. A mixture of short-answer, open-ended and multiple-choice items might gather quite similar information with considerably less work. Future research might well make use of such an approach. Getting data from a community sample would also be useful, as it is likely the norms, experiences, and ideas that university students have about apologies differ from those of people in the greater community. As for the scenario studies, the same hypotheses might be better studied in either a more engaging, lifelike environment. Alternatively, scenario studies might make use of polytomous apology variables (e.g. varying elaborateness) rather than dichotomous ones (i.e. varying apology presence). Such a solution might allow for a good deal more latitude in scenario construction.

At the beginning of this research we asked how apologies might create reconciliation in relationships. Our research certainly suggests that apologies do this through the expression of caring. Participants in Study 3 rated apologizing offenders as more caring than non-apologizing offenders. Responses to the open-ended study support this caring view as well. The role caring plays in apologies was mentioned repeatedly. Moreover, these open-ended responses are consistent with our proposition that apologies demonstrate caring at each of three levels – the ‘me’, ‘us’ and ‘you’ levels.

There are numerous questions left unanswered by our work. While we have gained the beginnings of an understanding of apologies from the perspective of the *offenders* in the open-ended study, we still have not enriched our understanding of apologies from the perspective of the victim. We found the pattern of men’s and women’s apologies were different; further work in *this* area might both deepen our understanding of apologies and clarify gender differences in closeness, caring and norms

for behavior. We have just begun to understand the power of apologies and how they work. Continued work in this area may contribute to a better understanding of forgiveness, reconciliation and close relationships.

NOTES

¹ Phone number 1-877-APOLOGIZE

² Goffman defines a social norm as a rule or guide for action, whose transgression results in punishment and whose fulfillment results in reward.

³ The corpus consisted of detailed accounts of apologies made by speakers of New Zealand English. Data were gathered using ethnographic methodology.

⁴ We chose to use only female characters in our scenarios as we suspected norms for both offense-related and apology-specific behavior for men and women might be different. We chose to use female participants because we thought it possible that men and women would have different norms for the behavior of the different genders. Added to these concerns was a concern about gender in-group effects, e.g. men might judge other men less harshly, might further muddy the waters. Had we included both genders in the scenarios and as participants, we would have ended up with a 2 (gender of offender) by 2 (gender of participant) by 2 (ingroup/outgroup) by 3 (high, low, equal power) design. As the proper assessment of these effects would have required a sample size of 480, we decided to exclude men from the study and feature only female characters in the scenarios.

⁵ Inclusion of these data do not change the results substantively; in fact, their inclusion lowers the p-value of the test of the effects of power on apology appropriateness.

⁶ Just as before, inclusion of these data do not change the results substantively; the p-value of the test of the effects of power on apology appropriateness is slightly higher (.03) when these data are included.

⁷ Inclusion of these data does not change the direction of any of the means. The p-value of the test of the main effects of apology appropriateness is slightly lower (.002 rather than .007) and the main effect for power loses significance. The apology x power interaction remains insignificant.

⁸ The term 'intimates' will be used throughout this paper to refer to those with whom we have close relationships: primarily friends, romantic partners and family.

⁹ Interestingly, in German the word for 'debt' is the same as the word for 'guilt' (Baumeister, in Enright 1998).

¹⁰ A particularly vivid example of such a sacrifice recently was reported on National Public Radio in March, 1999. Native Americans, deeply concerned with the plight of bison at risk from cattle farmers, held a protest. As a crowd gathered around, one man had his back pierced with sticks which were tied to Buffalo skulls. This man

circled the crowd dragging the skulls behind him as blood dripped from his wounds. The ceremony, rarely seen by whites, is a sacrifice to repay the earth. Says Lakota activist Rosalie Littlethunder, "We cannot give the earth anything because everything we have is taken from the earth and so the suffering is you know—the only offering we can give." (All Things Considered 3-12-99)

¹¹ Although it would seem clear that saying sorry to someone because their mother died is not an apology, a handful of subjects reported interactions of just such a nature.

¹² These categories are separated in the table since they seemed qualitatively different from one another; one involves a cognitive awareness of the transgression ("Did Wrong") while the other involves affect related to the transgression.

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