

# “I’ve said I’m sorry, haven’t I?” A Study of the Identity Implications and Constraints That Apologies Create for Their Recipients

MARK BENNETT  
*University of Dundee*

CHRISTOPHER DEWBERRY  
*Birkbeck College*

In contrast to previous research on apologies, which has examined their role in enhancing impressions of those issuing them (e.g., Darby and Schlenker, 1989), the research reported here draws upon Goffman’s (1955) analysis of the “corrective cycle” and is concerned with constraints associated with the receipt of apologies. Study 1 examines the implications for the actor of accepting, not accepting, or rejecting apologies. It is demonstrated that across a variety of judgments, most positive views of the actor result when apologies are accepted; least positive views are associated with their rejection. A follow-up study sought to establish whether this effect would occur under circumstances in which unconvincing apologies are rejected. Results indicate that the apology’s status (convincing versus unconvincing) has no bearing on perceptions of actors. Based on a hypothetical role-play format, Study 2 addresses the matter of whether actors experience a subjective sense of constraint upon receipt of unsatisfactory apologies. The data suggest that there exists a pronounced tendency to accept such apologies, though typically with conditions that would be specified to the offender. More general implications of the data are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

According to Lyman and Scott (1970) we often claim (or are thought to claim) to be a certain kind of person. For example, a manager may declare herself to be competent at organizing people and a friend may claim to be sensitive and tactful. However, sometimes identity claims may be threatened: the manager may be responsible for organizing an event that turns out badly, or the friend may hurt our feelings unnecessarily. When this happens and the “expressive order” (Goffman, 1955) or “smooth flow of interaction” (Semin and Manstead, 1983) is disrupted, a predicament is said to have arisen (Schlenker, 1980), and with it the danger that the actor will be ascribed an unwanted identity. To counter this danger, actors are able to deploy a variety of “facework strategies” (Goffman, 1955); that is, actions that realign behavior with face. For example, they might offer *excuses* (Austin, 1963; Snyder, Higgins and Stucky, 1983),

*justifications* (Tedeschi and Riess, 1981), or *apologies* (Darby and Schlenker, 1982, 1989). The focus of the present article is the apology, and particular attention is given to the social consequences of the receipt of apologies. In order to bring this matter into sharper relief, we begin by considering the manner in which all three remedial strategies function.

Excuses, justifications, and apologies help to restore preferred identities in different ways. An excuse seeks to deny responsibility for an undesirable event; for example, "I was late because my car broke down." A justification accepts responsibility but attempts to recast the event in a positive light; for example, "I was late because I wanted to help someone who'd collapsed on the sidewalk." In the case of the apology, responsibility and blameworthiness are accepted, and no attempt is made to encourage the re-examination of the behavior in question; for example, "I'm sorry for being late." Excuses and justifications provide the observer with an explanation for the offending behavior that serves to protect the actor's identity. However, in the case of an apology no such explanation is offered, and it is not immediately apparent how an apology might work to protect the actor's identity. How, then, do apologies aid the actor? Various writers (e.g., Tedeschi and Riess, 1981; Semin and Manstead, 1983) have suggested that apologies serve to indicate to an audience that the actor is cognizant of the rule that has been violated, that he or she regrets the violation, that it was atypical, and perhaps most importantly, that it will not recur. In short, the apology focuses attention not upon the causes of, or reasons for, the violation, but upon the actor himself or herself: efforts are made to persuade the audience that the offending behavior is not a valid representation of the actor's character.

That apologies do indeed bring about a more positive view of the actor has been demonstrated by Darby and Schlenker (1982, 1989), who required participants to judge actors who either had or had not issued apologies after committing a social offense. Over a range of dimensions (e.g., likability, goodness, punishability, blameworthiness), those offering apologies were perceived more favorably than those not. Ohbuchi, Kameda, and Agarie (1989), too, have demonstrated that from the victim's point of view, the "effects of an apology are mediated by impression improvement, emotional mitigation, and the reduction in desire for an apology" (p. 219). Such research, though important, has focused exclusively upon the implications of an apology for the identity of the person providing it. Little, if anything, is known about the implications of apologies for those receiving them. It is with this matter that the present study is concerned.

In research carried out to date, attention has been given to how variables internal to perceivers, or victims, are changed by the provision of an apology. A central claim of the present study is that apologies might also serve to change the social context by placing constraints upon their recipients. In particular, we suggest that the provision of an apology may create identity implications for recipients such that to challenge the person offering it may reflect adversely upon the person to whom it is offered. It is to a more detailed consideration of this matter that we now turn.

Goffman (1955) has argued that social interaction is characterized by a commitment

on the part of participants to maintaining one another's roles and identity claims. However, when disruptions in interaction occur, he suggests that a predictably sequenced "corrective interchange" ensues, the purpose of which is to return the encounter to a state of equilibrium. This interchange is made up of four principal stages:

1. the challenge, in which "participants take on the responsibility of calling attention to the misconduct" (p. 220), thereby noting the necessity for some form of account.
2. the offering, which will attempt to "correct for the offence and re-establish the expressive order" (p. 220), typically by providing an excuse, justification, apology, or some form of reparation.
3. the acceptance, in which the person(s) for whom the offering is intended will acknowledge it as a way of "re-establishing the expressive order" (p. 220).
4. the thanks, in which the offender indicates gratitude for the acceptance of the offering.

Though as Semin and Manstead (1983) have noted, "it is by definition the one who proffers an account whose identity is most at risk" (p. 98), we suggest in the light of the foregoing that by proffering an account, the offender places the victim in a position in which certain constraints have been imposed. As Goffman states, the corrective interchange is highly normative, and it is so, presumably, because of its central place in the process of re-establishing the expressive order; that is, the order "which regulates the flow of events, large or small, so that anything that appears to be expressed by them will be consistent with . . . face" (p. 215). It seems conceivable therefore that by violating normative expectations associated with acceptance of the offering, and precluding the re-establishment of the expressive order, the victim may shift the focus from the offender to himself or herself. In short, by standing in the way of the path to the normalization of the expressive order, the victim is likely to run the risk of being negatively evaluated by an audience. In particular, we suggest that in terms of the variables 1) perceptions of the identity of the victim, 2) audience sympathy for the victim, and 3) perceptions of damage to the relationship, negative judgments are likely to be made under circumstances in which the victim fails to accept the apology. Furthermore, we predict that judgments will be more negative still where the victim explicitly rejects the apology. Although Goffman does not make the conceptual distinction between failure to accept and rejection, it may be important insofar as greater ambiguity is likely to attend the failure to accept than outright rejection. As such, implications for the expressive order (or its breakdown) are likely to be clearer where the apology is explicitly rejected.

In summary, Study 1 addresses the following hypotheses: 1) that over a range of trait dimensions the victim will be viewed least positively when rejecting an apology and most positively when accepting it; 2) that acceptance of an apology results in the highest level of sympathy for the victim, that failing to accept substantially reduces sympathy, and that rejecting it further diminishes sympathy; and 3) that judgments of

the damage done to the relationship following a violation will be greatest where the apology is rejected and smallest where it is accepted.

## STUDY 1

### *Method*

*Subjects.* The participants were 52 female and 20 male undergraduate students, aged between 18 and 46 years ( $\bar{x}=23$ ), in an introductory psychology course.

*Procedure.* In the piloting phase of this study, four written descriptions of potentially offensive acts were generated. Thirty participants were required to provide ratings of the offensiveness of each act on 5-point scales (from “extremely inoffensive” (1) to “extremely offensive” (5)). They were also asked to indicate any ambiguities about the possible causes of the reported acts. A one-way analysis of variance conducted on the ratings revealed a significant difference in the perceived offensiveness of the acts. Post hoc testing established that no difference existed between scenarios 2, 3, and 4 but that these were perceived as significantly more offensive than scenario 1. For this reason scenario 1 was abandoned for the purposes of the main study. From open-ended comments concerning the lack of clarity about whether or not the offender in one of the remaining scenarios could be held responsible for the undesirable outcome, this scenario was also omitted from the main study. The remaining scenarios were judged as moderately serious, one receiving a mean offensiveness rating of 3.67, the other of 3.93 (max = 5).

The scenarios depicted the following predicaments. In one, the victim invites a new friend to dinner to meet some old friends. During the dinner the offender becomes drunk, dominates the conversation, and taunts the victim’s long-standing friends. In the other, the victim is described as owning a rare first edition of a text likely to be of use to the offender. Having been reminded to treat the book with care, the offender leaves the book on a bus; it cannot be recovered.

*Design.* The experiment involved three conditions, in each of which the offender offered identical apology-types within each situation: the apologies expressed remorse and offered reparation, as was found by Darby and Schlenker (1982) to be typical under circumstances involving moderately serious violations. Specifically, offenders were reported as remarking, “I can’t tell you how sorry I am about this. Let me take you out for an evening to make it up to you / I’ll phone around book dealers and try to get you a replacement.” The three experimental conditions were as follows:

*Condition 1*—Apology accepted. In this condition the victim was reported as responding to the apology with a smile and the remark, “Apology accepted; it’s the sort of thing anyone could do” (dinner party theme) / “accidents happen” (book theme).

*Condition 2*—Apology not accepted. Here the victim was reported as reacting to the apology with a frown, saying nothing in response to it, then proceeding to talk about an unrelated matter.

*Condition 3*—Apology rejected. The victim was described as responding to the apology with a frown and the remark, “You can keep your apology,” proceeding then to talk about another matter.

**TABLE 1**  
**Mean Identity Ratings over Conditions in Study 1**

	Cond. 1	Cond. 2	Cond. 3
Tolerant-intolerant	1.63	3.38	4.83
Emotional-unemotional	3.67	3.83	4.83
Strong-weak	3.62	3.33	3.50
Wise-foolish	3.29	3.46	3.88
Sociable-unsociable	2.67	3.17	3.54
Mature-immature	2.45	3.29	4.08

In each condition there were 24 participants, divided equally over the two situation types. None had previously participated in the pilot study.

*Dependent measures.* All subjects were required to rate the following on 7-point scales: victim's identity on the dimensions tolerant-intolerant, emotional-unemotional, strong-weak, wise-foolish, sociable-unsociable, and mature-immature (after Semin and Manstead, 1982); sympathy for offender; sympathy for victim; and how damaging to the relationship the event would be.

### Results

*Ratings of victim's identity.* The mean ratings of the victim's identity on the six rating scales, and across the three conditions, are shown in Table 1. To examine whether the conditions had an effect on the ratings, a mixed measures MANOVA was carried out, with the seven rating scales as one repeated measure, and with condition and theme as two further independent measures. As predicted, there was a main effect for condition  $F(2,66) = 14.25, p < .001$ . There was no main effect for theme  $F(1,66) = 2.57, p > .05$ , nor was there a condition by theme interaction  $F(2,66) = 2.91, p > .05$ .

To examine whether the ratings for condition 2 (apology not accepted) were greater than those for condition 1 (apology accepted), a further MANOVA was carried out, this time excluding all of the data relating to condition 3. A main effect for condition  $F(1,44) = 6.38, p < .02$  confirmed that the ratings in condition 2 were greater than those in condition 1. To examine whether the ratings for condition 3 (apology rejected) were greater than those for condition 2, a final MANOVA was undertaken, this time excluding all the data relating to condition 1. Once again there was a main effect for condition  $F(1,44) = 7.85, p < .02$ , this time indicating that the ratings in condition 3 were greater than those in condition 2.

*Sympathy ratings.* Contrary to prediction, no effect of condition upon sympathy for either victim or offender was found: for victim,  $F(2,71) = 0.22, p > .05$ ; for offender,  $F(2,71) = 0.24, p < .05$ . However, a 3 (condition)  $\times$  2 (sympathy for victim/offender) MANOVA revealed only that overall levels of sympathy were significantly greater for the victim than for the offender:  $F(1,69) = 48.56, p < 0.001$ ;  $\bar{x}$  victim = 4.82;  $\bar{x}$  offender = 3.35.

*Perceived damage to relationship.* As had been predicted, a main effect of condition was found:  $F(2,71) = 9.19, p < 0.001$ . Greatest damage was judged to result in condition

3 ( $\bar{x} = 4.46$ ), significantly less ( $p < 0.05$ ) in condition 2 ( $\bar{x} = 3.67$ ), and significantly less again ( $p < 0.05$ ) in condition 1 ( $\bar{x} = 2.88$ ).

### *Discussion*

The data reported here provide qualified support for the hypotheses guiding this study: although acceptance and rejection of an apology were found not to have predicted effects on sympathy (for either victim or offender), it was found that the victim's identity was viewed least positively when rejecting an apology and most positively when accepting it. This same pattern was noted for judgments of damage to the relationship: greatest damage was seen to result from rejection, relatively less from not accepting, and least from accepting. Thus, the victim's response to apology has an important bearing on judgments of his or her identity and of the future of the relationship between victim and offender.

Contrary to prediction, the extent to which sympathy was indicated did not differ over the three conditions. Furthermore, over all conditions, the victim was judged to be significantly more deserving of sympathy than was the offender. Conceivably, observers may be less motivated to make judgments about how deserving victim and offender are of sympathy than the victims themselves would be. Thus, it is plausible to suggest that a replication in which participants role-play the victim or offender may yield findings consistent with the hypotheses. Having said that, findings that go some way toward supporting the original hypotheses were 1) a significant negative correlation between extent of sympathy for the victim and victim's perceived tolerance ( $r = -.40$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ): the more intolerant the victim was seen to be, the less sympathy was indicated; and 2) a significant negative correlation between sympathy for the offender and victim's perceived sociability ( $r = -.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ): the less sociable the victim was judged to be, the more sympathy was indicated for the offender. Thus, sympathy might be directly related not to whether or not apologies are accepted, but to aspects of the manner (or inferred personality) of the victim.

Although this study provides partial support for the hypotheses, a proviso that must be made about all of the foregoing conclusions is that they relate to situations in which legitimate apologies are offered. However, an important question is whether the same sorts of findings would emerge where unconvincing apologies are offered. Arguably, this would represent a stricter test of the original hypothesis concerning the social norms governing the corrective cycle. Study 1B is a partial replication of Study 1, in which an actor is reported as rejecting an unconvincing apology. On the basis of Goffman's analysis of the normative demands of the corrective cycle, it is predicted that even when an apology is seen as unconvincing, the disruption of the expressive order that would be occasioned by rejection of the apology will result in judgments of the victim that are not significantly different from those resulting from the rejection of convincing apologies.

## STUDY 1B

### Method

**Participants.** There were 24 participants, 8 male and 16 female, with a mean age of 26 years.

**Procedure.** The procedure was identical to that employed in the previous experiment except that a minor modification was made to the hypothetical situations used and to the dependent measures.

The situations were identical to those used in the rejection condition of the previous study except that, in order to indicate that the apology might not be convincing, information was provided about the offender's reputation for committing the sorts of violations depicted. Thus, in the dinner situation, it was stated that following the offense, the victim learned that the offender was well known for drinking excessively and abusing people; in the book situation it was stated that the victim was advised, having lent the book, that the offender was renowned for showing disregard for other people's property. As in condition three of the previous study, the victim was reported as rejecting the apology.

The decision to suggest the unconvincingness of apology through reputation was based on Darby & Schlenker's (1989) finding that a story character with a "bad" reputation was judged to use apologies to avoid punishment rather than to express genuine contrition. Thus, under such circumstances, apologies are viewed as insincere and therefore unconvincing.

In order to establish whether the provision of information about reputation was successful in making the apology seem unconvincing, participants were required to rate the apology for convincingness on a 7-point scale (from "extremely convincing" to "extremely unconvincing"). Other than this, the dependent measures were those used in Study 1.

### Results

Data from the question concerning the convincingness of the apology indicated that the provision of information about the actor's reputation had the desired aim; the apology was viewed as unconvincing:  $\bar{x} = 5.0$  (on 7-point scale).

Data from the present study were compared to those from condition 3 (reject apology) of Study 1. A 3-way mixed measures MANOVA was carried out, with the six rating scales as a repeated measure, and with condition and theme as two independent measures. There was no main effect for condition  $F(1,44) = 0.58, p > .05$ . Actors rejecting illegitimate apologies were perceived no more positively than actors rejecting legitimate apologies.

Further analyses revealed that there was no difference in the levels of sympathy indicated for victim and offender, although this approached a significant level:  $t(23) = 1.82, p < 0.08$  ( $\bar{x}$  victim = 4.5;  $\bar{x}$  offender = 3.54). Finally, no differences were found in the convincingness of the apology offered over the two story themes.

### *Discussion*

The data provide strong support for the hypothesis guiding this study: rejecting unconvincing apologies would appear to be associated with the same sorts of attributions as result from the rejection of legitimate apologies. A noteworthy finding was that a correlational analysis established a significant relationship between the perceived convincingness of the apology and sympathy for the offender ( $r = .38, p < 0.05$ ); as would be expected from others' work (e.g., Schlenker & Darby, 1981), the greater the perceived convincingness of the apology, the greater the level of sympathy indicated.

The data also provide support for Darby & Schlenker's (1989) contention that reputation is an important factor in terms of the perception of apologies' convincingness. However, we allow that since we did not measure this variable in Study 1, we cannot provide unequivocal evidence for this contention. Nevertheless, in the light of Schlenker & Darby's (1981) study, it seems safe to suppose that the type of apology offered in Study 1 (i.e., involving reparation and remorse, in the absence of a questionable reputation) was perceived to be convincing.

What emerges very strongly from the two studies reported thus far is that recipients of apologies run the risk of incurring various negative attributions should they choose to reject them. This clearly suggests, as implied by Goffman (1955), that apologies are immensely powerful devices and that interactants are likely to feel under considerable pressure to accept them. In the study that follows we address this matter directly and attempt to establish whether, subjectively, victims feel constrained to accept illegitimate apologies.

## **STUDY 2**

For the most part, as Ohbuchi et al. (1989) have demonstrated, apologies serve to improve the victim's view of the offender, and in such cases the victim is unlikely to feel constrained to accept the apology. However, apologies are not invariably effective: as we have noted, there exist circumstances in which they can be seen as unsatisfactory, for example, if the apology is too perfunctory in relation to the offense (Schlenker and Darby, 1981) or if, as in Study 1b, it is issued by someone with a questionable reputation (Darby and Schlenker, 1989). Although we have established that the rejection of illegitimate apologies results in essentially identical attributions about the victim as does rejection of legitimate ones, matters that remain open are whether subjectively actors experience constraint and what courses of action they are likely to pursue in such circumstances. Study 2 addresses these matters.

### *Method*

*Participants.* Sixty participants participated in this study, all undergraduate students, 38 female and 22 male, aged between 18 and 26 years ( $\bar{x} = 20$  years).

*Procedure.* Subjects were required to role-play the central character in adaptations of the hypothetical situations previously used. Thus, half the subjects were asked to

imagine they had invited a new friend to have dinner with a group of established friends and that this person had proceeded to drink excessively and abuse the other guests. On a subsequent occasion the offender offered an apology. However, between the time of the event and the receipt of the apology, the subject had learned of the offender's reputation for this sort of behavior. The other half of the subjects were asked to imagine that they had lent a copy of a rare first edition to someone who, having promised to take care of it, lost it. Again, prior to the discovery of the book's loss and the receipt of an apology, it was learned that the offender had a reputation for treating others' property negligently.

Having read the account of the situation, subjects were required to indicate on 7-point scales 1) how much they would feel like rejecting the apology; 2) the likelihood that they would actually reject the apology; and 3) the convincingness of the apology. Finally, they were asked an open-ended question concerning their most likely course of action in the situation.

Responses to the open-ended question were content-analyzed. Responses were classified in terms of the following categories, which were generated post hoc.

1. Simple acceptance of apology (e.g., "I'd accept the apology"; "accept the apology and just hope for a replacement [book]"; "accept the apology and go out for a drink sometime").
2. Conditional acceptance of apology (e.g., "Accept the apology but talk over what had happened and say that it's not something I'd want to happen again"; "I'd tell her that if she got me a replacement I'd accept her apology").
3. Show offense (e.g., "I'd let her know I was angry and 'rub it in' as to how important the book was"; "I'd get angry and tell Ann that she had no respect for other people's property").
4. Other (e.g., "If it happened again, we'd not see each other again!").

It is noteworthy that there was no need for a category, *Rejects apology*. All responses were coded by two independent judges. Inter-rater agreement was 84%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

### Results

First of all, it is clear that subjects viewed the apology as unconvincing, as had been intended: ratings on a 7-point scale (convincing-unconvincing) yielded a mean score of 5.1.

Comparison of ratings for the extent to which subjects judged they would feel like rejecting the apology and for the likelihood that they would actually reject it revealed a significant difference:  $t(59) = 7.7, p < 0.001$ . Thus, the desire to reject was judged to be significantly stronger than was the behavioral intention to do so: desire,  $\bar{x} = 3.72$ ; behavioral intention,  $\bar{x} = 2.45$ .

Content analysis of the open-ended responses indicated that most subjects (55%)

reported they would respond to the apology with conditional acceptance; 33% stated they would accept the apology unconditionally; and 8.3% reported they would show offense (5% of responses fell into the “other” category). No subjects stated they would reject the apology. A chi square analysis revealed no association between type of response and situation type.

### *Discussion*

The data from Study 2 make clear that there is a strong subjective sense of constraint associated with the receipt of illegitimate apologies. Thus, subjects reported that their inclination to reject would be significantly greater than the actual likelihood of doing so. Furthermore, responses to the open-ended question suggest that the explicit rejection of apologies is extremely rare. The closest subjects seem to get to this is “showing offense” (i.e., getting angry and expressing disapproval), which was the form of response indicated by just 8.3% of subjects. Such a response perhaps approximates more closely the failure to accept an apology than outright rejection. An overwhelming majority of subjects (88%), however, indicated they would accept the apology, conditionally or otherwise.

In terms of the original aim of these studies (that is, to examine the constraining function of apologies), it is of interest that even within a role-play context (in which social consequences of normative violations are absent), subjects are extremely unlikely to indicate that they would reject an apology. However, perhaps the most interesting finding to have emerged from Study 2 is that a majority of subjects indicated their acceptance of the apology would be conditional: they would accept it if the offender fulfilled criteria specified by the victim. One interpretation of this finding is that, though desiring to reject apologies perceived to be illegitimate, victims may be aware of the consequences for their identity of doing so; conditional acceptance of the apology thus enables the re-establishment of the expressive order while saving the face of the victim, that is, by precluding attributions of weakness that might be associated with unconditional acceptance. Such a conjecture awaits empirical scrutiny.

A criticism of the present study is that the finding that subjects never predicted apology-rejection may in part be an artifact of the hypothetical situations used: in both cases, others are described as being present, and thus the absence of predictions of rejection may have been due to subjects' judgments about the likely attributions that would be made by those present. Again, it remains for further research to clarify this possibility.

In summary, what emerges from the present studies is the powerful constraining function of apologies. The function of the apology, then, should not be seen in exclusively individualistic terms, that is, serving merely to improve the victim's view of the offender, as has been assumed by researchers to date (e.g., Ohbuchi et al., 1989). Indeed, if this position were correct, unconvincing apologies could not be said to be “effective” in any sense, which clearly they are (i.e., in terms of averting obvious predicaments). Rather, the social function of apologies can more appropriately be

seen, as Goffman (1955) has asserted, in social terms, that is, as connected with the more general purpose of maintaining the smooth flow of interaction, which in turn sustains the identity claims of both (or all) interactants.

### NOTES

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