The Impact of Post-Apology Behavioral Consistency on Victim’s Forgiveness Intention: A Study of Trust Violation Among Coworkers

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This study extended past research and investigated how post-apology behavioral consistency influences subsequent forgiveness in an organizational setting. Using a sample of 326 working adults, we confirmed that post-apology behavioral consistency is an important boundary condition of the effectiveness of apology in eliciting forgiveness. Despite having received an apology, the victim’s intention to forgive would be low if the perpetrator displayed behaviors inconsistent with the apology made, but would be reinforced by the offending colleague’s behaving in accordance with the apology. People who have initially forgiven their colleagues are less susceptible to influences by subsequent post-apology behavioral inconsistency, although trust continues to be harmed by repeat violations.

What people at the receiving end do after an act that allegedly violates trust and causes emotional, financial, or physical harm has been a subject of recent research. In the fairness literature, for instance, it has been reported that the perpetrator’s providing explanations (in the form of excuses, rather than justifications) renders retaliation less likely (e.g., Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003). There is, however, another body of literature on forgiveness. As one of the options available to the victim, forgiveness can be defined as an intrapersonal process involving the reframing of the act of transgression that has caused negative feelings, such that the victim no longer holds a negative view of the person, seeks revenge, or avoids the person. At an individual level, forgiveness is related to better mental and physical health (e.g., Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2004). At a dyadic or group level, forgiveness allows for restoration of relationship, and perhaps reconciliation (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). At an organizational level, forgiveness is a good business strategy (Kurzynski, 1998). Forgiveness has a potential of restoring the damaged relationship.

Research on restoration of workplace relationship after trust violations has suggested that forgiveness could be a facilitator of healthy relationships in

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organizations, especially when offenses abound (Aquino, Grover, Goldman, & Folger, 2003). Forgiveness prevents the development of anger and vengeance, factors that inhibit organizational effectiveness. Cameron, Bright, and Caza (2004) proposed that forgiveness contributes to improving organizational harmony, increasing productivity, saving unnecessary expenses, and fostering cooperation, as well as collaboration among workers. Struthers, Dupuis, and Eaton (2005) provided preliminary evidence that social motivational training may be effective in enhancing forgiveness at the workplace.

Of the antecedents of forgiveness that have been examined by researchers, some are victim-related. Examples include victims’ dispositional forgiving (Brown, 2004; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001), rumination about the transgression (McCullough et al., 2001; McCullough et al., 1998), empathy for the perpetrator (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Wade & Worthington, 2005), and relationship commitment (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003). Demographic characteristics, such as religious faith (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2005) and culture (Suwartono, Prawasti, & Mullet, 2007) may also play a role.

Other antecedents of forgiveness are situational. They include offense severity (Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004), recency of the transgression (Wohl & McGrath, 2007), responsibility attributions (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003), perceived recidivism (Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004), and perpetrator’s explanation (Fukuno & Ohbuchi, 1998).

Besides providing explanations, one of the things that the perpetrators can do to facilitate organizational forgiveness and subsequent restoration of the relationship is to apologize. An apology is an acknowledgment of the wrongfulness of an act, as well as an admission of responsibility. The perpetrator is remorseful and repentant, and has a sense of being humbled (Exline & Fisher, 2006). It is in contrast to making an excuse (which is a denial of responsibility) and reticence (which is a refusal to confirm or deny the wrongdoing). Although the word *apology* has indeed been used to refer to an excuse (as in sending an apology for not going to a meeting), in this paper we ascribe a narrower, moral meaning to it.

Tavuchis (1991) defined an *apology* as a speech act in which sorrow is expressed and forgiveness is sought. A somewhat expanded definition was offered by Gill (2000), who identified five elements of a complete apology for a non-trivial transgression:

1. An acknowledgement that the incident in question did in fact occur;
2. An acknowledgement that the incident was inappropriate in some way;
3. An acknowledgement of responsibility for the act;
4. The expression of an attitude of regret and a feeling of remorse; and
5. The expression of an intention to refrain from similar acts in the future. (p. 12).

With the final component, there is usually an implied promise that compensations will be made or that similar transgressions will not be repeated. With this, the perpetrator pleads for trust. While some writers do not consider the promise not to repeat the offense an essential part of apology, in the present paper we adopt the position that a full apology always includes a promise.

A full apology was defined previously as an antecedent of forgiveness and relationship restoration. This has been documented in dating dyads (e.g., Bachman & Guerrero, 2006), customer–provider dyads (Liao, 2007), and judicial settings (Allan, Allan, Kaminer, & Stein, 2006). Researchers have found that victims are less likely to retaliate if an apology is received (e.g., Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995; Bies & Tripp, 1996; Girard, Mullet, & Callahan, 2002). This is true of children (Darby & Schlenker, 1982) and of adults (Girard & Mullet, 1997). Using a vignette approach, Tomlinson et al. (2004) found that following a workplace transgression, victims are more ready to reconcile with the perpetrator if the latter has made an apology, especially if that apology includes an acceptance of culpability and responsibility.

Notwithstanding, very little research has been conducted on workers and about transgressions in work settings. The boundary conditions for the effectiveness of apology on organizational forgiveness are not fully known. Some speculations have been made by Lazare (2004), who opined that in healthcare, apologies for medical errors are effective only when they are made promptly. In contrast, unreasonable delays would give patients an impression of disrespect and deceit. There is some empirical demonstration that an apology that is given too early may not be effective (e.g., Frantz & Bennigson, 2005). Timing is important, for the victims might need time to self-express and to realize that they have been understood by the perpetrator. Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, and Dirks (2004) found that trust could be restored by the perpetrator apologizing, only if the offense is competence-based and not integrity-based, or if there is subsequent evidence of guilt. (Integrity-based violations involve breaching intentionally some commonly accepted moral codes, rather than being unable to complete a task.) There is also evidence that for competency-based violations, an apology with internal attribution is more effective than is an apology with external attribution. The difference is reversed for integrity-based violations (Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006). Very little theoretical or empirical work has examined other conditions under which apologies are effective.
The purpose of the current paper is to present an apology–forgiveness model to summarize some of the existing findings, and to investigate a possible boundary condition proposed in the model. According to this basically cognitive, attributional model (Figure 1), the perpetrator’s delivery of an apology is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of its intended goal. The apology would have the potential of eliciting trust and forgiveness only if it is received by the victim, and if it is subsequently interpreted as genuine and sincere.

There are several determinants of whether an apology will be interpreted as genuine and sincere. The first boundary condition is the victim’s prior knowledge about the perpetrator and the offense. An apology from someone who has a track record of transgression, or someone who does not have a set of desirable personality characteristics, or someone in a negatively stereotyped social group will be less trusted. The apology will have a less positive effect than if it had come from someone about whom the victim has favorable impressions. Furthermore, if the victim has personally witnessed the transgression—that is, he or she is fairly certain that the perpetrator is responsible and guilty—an apology will project an impression of honesty. On the other hand, an apology may not have much of a positive effect if it is not clear if the apology giver is, indeed, responsible (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). However, some data suggest that an apology loses its effect when the offender is seen to have committed the behavior intentionally (Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008).

Figure 1. The apology–forgiveness model.
Another possible determinant is the time lag between the offense and delivery of the apology. While an apology that is delivered too early may not be effective (Frantz & Bennigson, 2005), an unduly long delay for an apology (especially if it is given only after intense public pressure) may signal to the recipient that the perpetrator is either reluctant to admit guilt or wants to hide something, both of which are indicators of insincerity and untrustworthiness. Finally, whether the perpetrator has taken remedial actions will allow the victim to gauge the sincerity of the apology. A study by Zechmeister et al. (2004) found that student participants who were offended by an experimenter were less likely to volunteer additional research hours if the experimenter merely apologized but did not make good on the offense. This finding is related to the focal variable of the present study: the consistency of the perpetrator’s post-apology behavior with the apology.

Behaviors that are inconsistent with an apology suggest to the victim and observers that the earlier apology was insincere. These may include failing to take a promised remedial action (i.e., omission) or continuing to act in an untrustworthy manner (i.e., commission). Severe cases involve lying (e.g., to cover other lies). There are good reasons why post-apology behavioral inconsistency is a moderator of the apology–forgiveness link.

First, a behavior that is inconsistent with the apology will probably be perceived as an additional instance of the earlier transgression, or another transgression that is just as (or more) unacceptable as the previous one. It would stand out clearly in the victim’s memory and would be processed more extensively; whereas consistent behavior draws less attention, is regarded as less informative, and is processed less thoroughly.

Second, a behavior that is inconsistent with an earlier apology asking for forgiveness will confirm the victim’s fear and expectation that the perpetrator will transgress again. On the other hand, the perpetrator’s behaviors that are consistent with the apology will be reassurance of safety in the future relationship between the two parties.

Third, and more importantly, behavioral inconsistency hurts trust, which is related to the belief that the other party will act in a predictable manner. Consistent (hence predictable) behavior will understandably strengthen trust. On the contrary, if after an interpersonal transgression—which is often already quite unexpected and unpredicted—the perpetrator behaves inconsistently with his or her undertaking, predictability will be further harmed, and trust will be severely damaged. Worse still, a belief will be formed that the perpetrator will consistently do things that are hurtful to the victim. In this case, trust will take a downward turn and will require an extremely long time to rebuild (Slovic, 1993). Apology without deeds is not as useful as those that are followed up with substantial penance (Bottom, Gibson, Daniels, & Murnighan, 2002). Therefore, we propose the following:
Hypothesis 1. A victim’s trust in the perpetrator will decrease as a result of the perpetrator behaving in a manner that is inconsistent with the apology, and will increase if the perpetrator behaves in a manner that is consistent with the apology.

Hypothesis 2. A victim’s forgiveness will decrease as a result of the perpetrator behaving in a manner that is inconsistent with the apology, and will remain stable if the perpetrator behaves in a manner that is consistent with his or her apology.

Forgiveness can also be viewed as an altruistic gift (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998), which benefits not only the perpetrator, but more importantly frees the victim from the pursuit of punitive actions. In other words, the act of forgiving could help restart the relationship and evaluation of each other by writing off the negative experience of transgression. In contrast, not forgiving could mean holding on to the grudge. Any new transgression is likely to rekindle negative feelings (e.g., anger), which intensifies the hatred.

Forgiveness is not merely a reversal of negative affect, but also involves some changes in cognition. It is, therefore, reasonable to expect that a forgiving person will be different from an unforgiving person in their views of the perpetrator and their interpretation of any subsequent interaction with the perpetrator. The former may be a little more generous and, in the event of a second offense, regard it as less serious than would one who has not forgiven at the time of the second offense. If this speculation is valid, we would expect that, compared to others who are less forgiving at the first instance, someone who initially forgives will be less affected by the perpetrator’s subsequent inconsistent behavior. Thus, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 3. A victim’s initial forgiveness of the perpetrator will moderate the effect of subsequent behavior that is inconsistent with the apology, such that behavioral inconsistency will have a stronger impact on those who initially do not forgive than on those who do.

Although forgiveness is related to trust, the two are conceptually distinct constructs. There are times when an untrustworthy person is forgiven (though reconciliation does not occur). Furthermore, having forgiven a person does not mean that the victim will continue to trust that person. While forgiveness can be volitional and deliberative (e.g., Worthington, 2005), trust is not. After all, forgiveness is unnatural, but trust and distrust follow rather automatically, as one tallies positive and negative events that have occurred in the past. For this reason, we do not expect those who do not trust the
perpetrators in the first instance to be any more strongly affected by an inconsistent post-apology behavior than those who have some trust in the perpetrators.

We intended to contribute to the forgiveness literature by examining the construct in a non-Western culture. Although some studies in forgiveness are beginning to emerge outside of North America (e.g., Fu, Watkins, & Hui, 2004; Hui, Watkins, Wong, & Sun, 2006), work on organizational forgiveness is relatively sparse in Asia. There is no consensus yet, for example, on whether the Chinese are different from their counterparts in the West (Paz, Neto, & Mullet, 2008). Testing the apology–forgiveness model described previously in a Chinese culture that many believe to be collectivistic would be valuable.

Method

Participants

To maximize the generalizability of our findings, we attempted to sample from the work population as diversely as practicable. While drawing a completely random sample from this population was almost impossible, as it was difficult to define the sampling frame, we still had to avoid obtaining participants from a single source. To this end, we recruited over 14 volunteer assistants who were currently employed in different organizational settings. Each of them invited colleagues at their respective workplaces to take part in the study. We also approached part-time students in two non-degree, continuing education programs. Most of these individuals have daytime jobs. A total of 326 Chinese working adults participated in the study voluntarily.

Because of incomplete information, 7 cases were dropped from subsequent analyses, leaving 319 participants (146 men, 173 women). Of these participants, 56.4% were within the 20–29 age bracket, 33.2% were within the 30–39 age bracket, and 10.3% were 40 years or older. They came from public and private organizations, across different industries (e.g., retailing, finance). There were 223 participants (70% of the entire sample) who reported their educational level and years of working experience: They had all completed high school, with 115 (52%) holding one or more degrees. In addition, 152 participants (68%) had been working for 1 to 9 years; 56 (25%) had been working for 10 to 19 years; and 15 (7%) had been working for 20 years or more. About 29% reported being either Catholic or Protestant, 5% were Buddhist, and 65% indicated that they had no religious faith. All of them were residing in a city in the south of China.
Procedure

To examine how post-apology behavioral consistency affects trust and forgiveness, we conducted a two-wave scenario experiment. We randomly assigned participants to one of two groups. Both groups read a scenario in which a mistake by the participants’ coworker had caused a failure in a bid for a project. The coworker subsequently apologized for his mistake and explained that his reason for submitting a high bidding price was to earn a little more commission for the entire team. He promised to refrain from doing similar things again, and to consult the participants in the future. He even bought the participant a big dinner. At this point, participants’ trust in the coworker and intention to forgive were measured (Time 1).

Participants in the Consistent group were then told, in the scenario, that this coworker subsequently behaved consistently with his apology. The target person had reported to senior management that the failure of the bidding was a result of his raising the bidding price and being late on the day of the presentation. A few months later, when the target person worked with the participant again, he took his job seriously and executed it carefully. He discussed with the participant every detail, and agreed on the budget. On the evening before the presentation, the coworker arranged to have a rehearsal. On the following morning, the person arrived very early to get ready for the presentation.

Participants in the Inconsistent group were told that the coworker subsequently behaved inconsistently with the apology. The inconsistency information was about an accidental discovery that the coworker had not been truthful in his report to senior management on why the bid failed. He had instead blamed the participant for insisting on raising the bidding price. Moreover, according to the information provided, a few months later, when the coworker had another opportunity to write a bid together with the participant, he was late again on the day of the presentation. Without consulting the participant, he made changes to the plan, which resulted in a 25% increase to the cost. His explanation was that he had not had time to consult the participant. After reading the additional piece of information, participants in both groups were asked to indicate their trust in the coworker and their intention to forgive (Time 2).

Measures

Trust in the perpetrator was assessed with an instrument translated into Chinese and modified from the Organizational Trust Inventory–Short Form (OTI-SF; Cummings & Bromiley, 1996). The original 15-item questionnaire
measures trust as consisting of an ability to keep a commitment, honesty in negotiation, and restraint from taking advantage of the other party. Sample items from the current version include “He is reliable,” and “He takes advantage of people who are vulnerable.”

Forgiveness was assessed with an instrument that was translated and modified from the 12-item Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations scale (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998). Sample items from the current version are “I’ll make him pay,” and “I withdraw from him.” Although this scale has been used to measure forgiveness of a transgression, judging from the item content, it can be regarded as a measure of forgiveness toward a transgressor. For both instruments, the items were rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (absolutely not) to 6 (absolutely).  

Although the TRIM (McCullough et al., 1998) is comprised of two sub-scales (i.e., Revenge motive, Avoidance motive), because of their relatively lower internal consistency (.67 and .52, respectively), they were not analyzed separately in the main study to be reported here. Instead, we aggregated the responses on the 12 items to yield a single forgiveness score. Cronbach’s alphas for OTI-SF and TRIM administered at Time 1 were .83 and .86, respectively.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the study variables, measured before and after the manipulation. The table also contains zero-order correlation coefficients among them.

For a subsample of 223 individuals, we included a manipulation check on whether or not the perpetrator’s subsequent behavior was perceived as consistent with the apology. This was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (not consistent) to 6 (consistent). There was a strong, significant difference between the Consistent group (N = 111; M = 4.98, SD = 0.84) and the Inconsistent group (N = 112; M = 1.33, SD = 0.56), t(222) = 38.17, p < .05. The manipulation was successful.

Table 2 displays the statistics for the Consistent and Inconsistent groups separately. Before the manipulation, the two groups were similar on both trust and forgiveness. Subsequent to the manipulation, there was an increase

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3For about two thirds of the participants, the OTI-SF was presented in a 7-point format. Data from these participants were transformed into a 6-point format prior to analysis.

4Because of an oversight in data entry, responses on individual items for this analysis were available for 96 and 93 participants, respectively.
in trust and forgiveness in the Consistent group, and a reversed trend in the Inconsistent group.

**Post-Apology Behavioral Consistency**

We conducted a repeated-measures ANOVA on trust, with consistency, gender, and age as between-subjects factor; and time of measurement as a within-subjects factor. As expected, there was a strong effect of consistency on trust, $F(1, 314) = 276.88, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .66$. We conducted a similar ANOVA on forgiveness. Again as expected, there was a strong effect of consistency, $F(1, 311) = 239.63, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .39$.

There was a highly significant interaction effect between consistency and time on trust, $F(1, 314) = 252.66, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .78$. The interaction between consistency and time on forgiveness was equally strong, $F(1, 311) = 636.95, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .67$. An examination of the marginal means, adjusted for the covariates, evidences that forgiveness and trust between the Consistent and Inconsistent groups did not differ from each other at Time 1. However, at Time 2, forgiveness in the Consistent group ($M = 4.24; 95\%$ confidence interval [CI] = 4.10–4.38) was much higher than that in the Inconsistent group ($M = 1.79; 95\%$ CI = 1.65–1.92). Time 2 rating on trust ($M = 4.32; 95\%$ CI = 4.24–4.41) in the Consistent group was also higher than that in the Inconsistent group ($M = 1.75; 95\%$ CI = 1.66–1.83). Figure 2 illustrates the interactions. Trust declined for the Inconsistent group, from 2.96 to 1.75. Forgiveness also declined in that group, from 3.19

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### Table 1

**Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations Among Study Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Trust, Time 1</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>0.61</td>
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<td>2. Trust, Time 2</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Forgiveness, Time 1</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>.63***</td>
<td>.14*</td>
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<td>4. Forgiveness, Time 2</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>.19***</td>
<td>.89***</td>
<td>.32***</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Gender</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>−.07</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>−.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Age</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>−.10</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>−.11</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.05</td>
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</table>

*Note. N = 316. Gender: 1 = male; 2 = female. Age: 1 = 20–29 years old; 2 = 30–39 years old; 3 = 40 years or older.*

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001 (two-tailed).
to 1.79. A reverse trend was observed for the Consistent group. The differences in means across the two rounds of measurement suggest that inconsistent behavior had an inhibitive effect on trust and forgiveness. Both Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported.

As shown in Table 2, trust at Time 1 and Time 2 correlated at .32 and .36 for the Consistent and Inconsistent groups, respectively. Forgiveness at Time 1 and Time 2 correlated at .45 and .60 for the Consistent and Inconsistent groups, respectively.

The moderate correlations between Time 1 and Time 2 suggest that a certain degree of individual differences was operating on subsequent trust

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>t</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consistent group (N = 161)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.32***</td>
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<td>Time 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.45***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust 1–Trust 2</td>
<td>-1.31</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-22.99***</td>
<td>160</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Forgiveness 1–Forgiveness 2</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-14.96***</td>
<td>157</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Inconsistent group (N = 158)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.36***</td>
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<td>Time 1</td>
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<td>Time 2</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.60***</td>
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<td>Time 2</td>
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<td>1.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust 1–Trust 2</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>24.16***</td>
<td>157</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forgiveness 1–Forgiveness 2</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>20.39***</td>
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Note. Trust 1 = trust at Time 1; Trust 2 = trust at Time 2; Forgiveness 1 = forgiveness at Time 1; Forgiveness 2 = forgiveness at Time 2.

***p < .001 (two-tailed).
and forgiveness toward the perpetrator. To clarify this relationship, we tested two regression models. One model predicted trust at Time 2 with trust measured at Time 1, the experimental variable, and the interaction term, after controlling for demographics. The other model predicted forgiveness at Time 2 with forgiveness measured at Time 1, the experimental variable, and the interaction term, after controlling for demographics. The results, which are summarized in Tables 3 and 4, confirm the effect of post-apology behavioral consistency.

The regression analyses also reveal an interaction effect between forgiveness at Time 1 and consistency on forgiveness at Time 2. This effect can be presented in two ways. First, as shown in Figure 3, the initial intention to forgive the other party was more predictive of subsequent willingness to forgive for people who were transgressed a second time after receiving an apology (Inconsistency group) than for people who were not faced with a repeat transgression (Consistent group). Figure 4 presents the results slightly differently, for those who were initially forgiving and those who were less forgiving. While both groups would respond negatively to the perpetrator’s inconsistent post-apology behavior and would forgive less at Time 2 (as indicated by the negative slopes), people who were initially less forgiving were more susceptible to the impact of the inconsistency, and forgave even less. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is supported. There was no corresponding moderating effect of the initial levels of trust.

*Figure 2.* Forgiveness and trust as a function of time of measurement and post-apology behavioral consistency.
The primary purpose of the present study was to understand one possible boundary condition of the apology–forgiveness link. Our apology–forgiveness model assumes that while apology is a facilitating factor for forgiveness to occur, it does not always lead to forgiveness. An apology would result in forgiveness and restoration of trust only if it is interpreted as sincere. In line with this model, the present study clearly shows that as the perpetrator’s behaviors that are inconsistent with the apology made earlier unfold over time, trust and forgiveness will decline. There may be several reasons for this. First, inconsistent behavior tells the person at the receiving end that the actor is unpredictable. While the earlier apology was an attempt to re-establish the perpetrator’s reliability in the victim’s mind, a repeat offense...
Table 4

*Regression Analysis Predicting Forgiveness at Time 2*

<table>
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<th>95% CI of B</th>
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<td>.09</td>
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*Note.* F(5, 310) = 206.28, *p* < .001. LB = lower boundary; UB = upper boundary. Betas shown here are derived from the final model. Predictor Forgiveness at Time 1 was centered. Gender: 1 = male; 2 = female. Age: 1 = 20–29 years old; 2 = 30–39 years old; 3 = 40 years or older. Consistency: 0 = consistent; 1 = inconsistent.

***p < .001 (two-tailed).

...carries a message that the apology cannot be used as a basis for prediction of future behavior.

A second reason why a behavior inconsistent with a prior apology is damaging can be traced to the recipient’s expectation. The apology alters the recipient’s perception of the perpetrator and, in so doing, influences the former’s expectations about the perpetrator’s subsequent behavior. According to Lazare (2004), “With no apology, one can hope for a future apology, but with a failed apology, one often concludes the matter is hopeless” (p. 73). An inconsistent behavior foretells future untrustworthy behaviors. Because any further forgiveness may be risky, the compassion motive is less likely than the justice motive to be activated. Forgiveness, therefore, gives way to revenge and retribution.

Third, an act inconsistent with the implied promise in an apology tells the recipient that the original apology was insincere. This further undermines the...
relationship that has already suffered damage from the previous trust violation. This is probably because when people are deceived, let down, and humiliated by the same person a second time, they feel that they were treated like a fool. Unlike a first-time offense—which can sometimes be attributed to incompetence (e.g., lack of experience) and thus can be treated leniently—this second offense will less likely be seen as competence-based. On the contrary, this repeated offense (which may be attributed to the lack of competence) may be regarded as an instance of intentionally breaking an implicit promise that the perpetrator would improve on the deficient skills, and thus is categorized as an integrity-based offense. This is especially so when the perpetrator has previously made a promise not to repeat that offense. As shown in Figure 1, when the victim does not interpret the perpetrator’s apology as sincere, there would be no trust or forgiveness. On the contrary, intense negative emotions would ensue (e.g., resentment).

What we have not fully anticipated is that the additional information about consistent post-apology behavior plays an equally important role in solidifying and enhancing the interpersonal trust and forgiveness that have already begun to emerge. Although the perpetrator did not ask for more
forgiveness, a consistent act performed was an additional piece of favorable information about the person, and would constitute a stage-specific determinant in the model; that is, the victim’s prior knowledge of the perpetrator. This had the effect of strengthening forgiveness. We know that negative feelings about a perpetrator often subside over time, even without additional input (McCullough et al., 2003; Wohl & McGrath, 2007; Worthington et al., 2000). However, the present study suggests that it would be to the perpetrator’s advantage in securing forgiveness if he or she has more opportunities to demonstrate with his actions remorse and repentance. As the old adage states, actions do speak louder than words.

Subsequent behavior inconsistent with an earlier apology accentuates unforgiveness in the recipient, but has comparatively weaker effects on people who do forgive. This observation has two important implications. First, it corroborates the view that most researchers in the field hold; that is, forgiveness is not merely the idea of not feeling too upset about someone.

Figure 4. Predicted forgiveness at Time 2 as a function of post-apology consistency for high- and low-forgiveness participants at Time 1.
Instead, it is something that a person gives despite the perpetrator not deserving it. If volitional, deliberate forgiveness is not contingent on the offense itself, a repeated offense in the form of inconsistent post-apology behavior becomes less influential on the subsequent forgiveness of the perpetrator.

Second, the observation suggests that different people will react differently to further violations of trust after an apology has been made. It draws our attention to a possible interplay between a contextual factor (i.e., whether an apology has been followed up with consistent vs. inconsistent behavior) and a dispositional variable; namely, forgivingness. The latter is a trait distinguishable from forgiveness (which is a state), although the two are empirically related (Thompson, et al., 2005). This might open up a new line of research on how the effects of the major contextual moderators of the link between apology and organizational forgiveness will be further moderated by dispositional characteristics.

The absence of an interaction effect between post-apology behavioral inconsistency and the initial level of trust (against the backdrop of the interaction effect discussed in the preceding paragraph) bears some support to the thesis that trust is different from forgiveness. The former is more strongly affected by the perpetrator’s behavior than the latter, thus underscoring the conceptual difference between the two, as well as highlighting the notion that forgiveness is given despite and not because of the target person’s action. We nevertheless admit that more straightforward evidence would be needed before a strong case can be made.

Practical Implications

We can draw from this study a practical implication on relationship repair with a colleague whom one has offended. Past research has already identified the essential elements of an effective apology: acknowledging the offense, assuming responsibility, communicating remorse, and offering reparations. The present study further indicates that after making an apology, a perpetrator hoping to restore a relationship should avoid repeating the offense, which will make the victim more convinced that the original apology was shallow, insincere, and even fraudulent. One way to avoid inconsistent post-apology behavior is to promise only what one can and will deliver, and never undertake to do things that one may be reluctant to do. This recommendation may generalize beyond the workplace.

From the victim’s perspective, one must understand that repeated offenses are common in the workplace, where organizational members are not allowed much freedom in choosing their colleagues and, therefore, are
“stuck” with certain people. However, it is worthwhile to understand that while a repeated offense says much about the perpetrator, the fact that the other party may seem unforgivable could be partly a result of the victim’s own propensity to not forgive. Peers, supervisors, and counselors who attempt to resolve workplace conflicts could help the injured to see that their own willingness to forgive and lay aside bitterness will affect how well they will recover from additional resentment caused by a colleague’s future re-transgression. After all, not all faults lie with the perpetrator.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to the present study that should be noted. First, because of ethical concerns, instead of real-life experimental manipulation of the key variable, we had to constrain ourselves to the use of a vignette. Allowing us to control the stimuli, this approach required participants to imagine what they would do in the situation. This inevitable limitation does not mean, however, that we should be complacent about scenario studies. There is, in fact, an urgent need to study how real-life apologies and moderators (e.g., post-apology behaviors) affect trust and forgiveness. Research strategies, such as retrospective, biographical studies and field observations would prove highly valuable in supplementing scenario studies.

Second, the manipulation of behavioral consistency requires additional information, which may be considered confounds. For example, when participants in the Inconsistent group indicated at Time 2 whether they would forgive and trust in the perpetrator, they were basing their decision on two transgressions, whereas participants in the Consistent group were basing their decision on one transgression plus a neutral (or even a positive) behavior. However, it must be argued that post-apology behavioral inconsistency inherently involves more transgressions and is at a higher level of conceptual abstraction than is the mere number of transgressions.

A third possible limitation of the present study is our use of Chinese participants, who may not share the same cultural values with those in the West. We do not consider this a major limitation, however. For one thing, globalization has already shrunk the world. The work organizations from which we recruited our participants have strong ties with the Western world. English is being used almost everywhere. Also, the hypotheses we tested were derived from the empirical literature, based on non-Chinese populations. If anything, our findings provide some clues of universality. That is why we earlier wrote that we intended to contribute to the forgiveness literature by using a non-Western sample. Of course, it is still desirable for the study to be replicated in another society.
Fourth, generalizability of the current findings might be restricted because in our study, we only examined the apology–forgiveness relationship in an integrity-based trust violation. Future research should extend the present findings to situations in which the trust violation and interpersonal transgression are competency-based. For example, an inconsistent post-apology behavior or outcome may be less damaging on trust and forgiveness in transgressions that are competency-based, unless the perpetrator undertakes in his or her apology to improve on the respective competency. This situation is particularly relevant in organizations, as low-performing subordinates are often made to admit mistakes and to promise to gain skills that are essential to a task once failed.

There is a dearth of research on forgiveness in work organizations. There have been even fewer studies that treat forgiveness as an ongoing process. The present study makes a unique contribution by examining trust and forgiveness not as static constructs, but as states that could be altered by additional information acquired in an interpersonal setting. It extends our understanding of how apology would enhance trust and forgiveness and may, in turn, assist in the repair of a relationship that has been damaged by interpersonal offense. Specifically, it shows that while apology is valuable, it must be followed up with a corresponding set of behaviors, without which the apology would be empty.

Although to some people forgiveness should be unconditional, our findings as well as others suggest that it can still be facilitated by certain situational, dyadic conditions. While we do not dismiss the possibility of an ideal, true forgiveness to smooth a strained interpersonal relationship, a perpetrator can at least take certain steps; namely, to apologize and to follow up with behaviors that are consistent with the apology. These steps do not require the assumption that the recipients are altruistic and generous.

References


