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Lilah M. Parker
Grand Valley State University

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The Life of an Apology

Lilah M. Parker

Grand Valley State University

Professor Vinicius Lima

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Mentor

Professor Vinicius Lima

Abstract

Apologies, the development of and the aftermath from, are present in almost all of society. For that reason, they are arguably one of the most interesting forms of human interaction. This paper will review various sources of literature in an attempt to understand what kind of power an apology holds, as well as where it comes from. This will be done, first by developing a familiarity with the psychology behind certain emotions that influence apology making behaviors. Focus will be placed specifically on the developmental psychology of self-conscious emotions and the idea of self-esteem. These ideas of self awareness and representation will then be considered in relation to victim and transgressor characteristics. These relationships will be central to understanding certain barriers to comprehensive apologies, as well as the various types of forgiveness one may experience. As the processes that underlie forgiveness often look quite different from one scenario to the next, this paper will provide real world examples of how different apologies look depending on context. In conclusion, the aftermath of an apology, and ideas such as resentment and reconciliation will be addressed.

The Life of an Apology

In order to understand any complex topic, starting at the very root of the subject matter is important. When dealing with the study of people and human interaction, this “root” can be recognized as the relationship to self, and how it causes people to act the way that they do. The scientific term for this type of analysis is psychology. For the purpose of discussion regarding apologies and forgiveness, this paper will look specifically at developmental psychopathology as a starting point. Ideas such as self-esteem and interpersonal relationships, as well as certain emotions such as shame, guilt, and pride, all have an impact on apology-making behaviors. Due to the variety and variability of factors that play into any forgiveness experience, several different types of apologies, as well as the cause and effect of these relationships, will be addressed.

Psychopathology, the approach to understanding the nature of normal and abnormal development, helps to develop an understanding of one’s relationship to self. Ideas such as self-esteem and identity play a major role in this process, and are evident in how one navigates their social environment. These relationships to self differ from one person to the next, due in large part to the ways in which they developed as a child. Their environment, social influences, and individual characteristics all play a role in what is understood as the self-conscious (Muris & Meesters 23). Not only does the individual develop an understanding of the self, they also establish certain ways in which they wish to be understood and seen by others.

This “innate desire to form and maintain firm and stable interpersonal relationships is closely linked to the theme of being accepted or rejected by others” (Muris & Meesters 24). This theme of acceptance or rejection ties back to the quality of a child’s early bonding to their primary caregiver. (Muris & Meesters 24). In the case of insecure attachment, children and

adolescents are more susceptible to experience rejection and the self-conscious emotions of guilt and shame. (Muris & Meesters 24) As a result, they may develop lower self-esteem.

Self-esteem refers to an “individual's subjective evaluation of his or her worth as a person... self esteem does not necessarily reflect a person's objective talents and abilities” (Robins 381). Self-esteem is an internal evaluation of worth, which is different from self awareness, which takes into account the ways in which one is perceived by others. A high self-esteem “is commonly conceptualized as the feeling that one is good enough... individuals with high self esteem do not necessarily believe they are superior to others. Thus self-esteem involves feelings of self-acceptance, and self-respect” (Robins 381). Each person has a differing level of self-esteem; it is because of this that “individuals who are emotionally stable, conscientious, and extraverted tend to show more positive self esteem development than individuals who are low on these traits. (Robins 383). This variability in self-esteem leads to the development of emotions such as shame, guilt, pride, and respect, which all play a role in apology making behaviors.

“Self-conscious emotions such as shame, guilt, and pride constitute a special class of emotions that help people to navigate successfully in the social environment. These emotions serve to monitor one’s interactions with others, and lead them to correct moral and social transgressions and maintain socially appreciated behavior” (Muris & Meesters 19). The awareness of self not only allows one to see themselves as an individual, but also to perceive themselves within a larger context, creating a sense of self-evaluation and self-reflection. These emotions arise “when a person perceives and evaluates him/herself through the eyes of other people” (Muris & Meesters 20). The cycle of self-regulation is present within every aspect of life.

Self-regulation is particularly impactful when one is exposed to identity-relevant events. “Identity-relevant events are those events that provoke a person to focus attention on the self, explicitly or implicitly activate one’s self-representations, thereby allowing the individual to make a self-evaluation. (Muris & Meesters 21). Identity relevant events are common within the workplace, or any other environment where an individual is hyper-aware of their self regulation, particularly in the ways in which it is impacted, or has an impact on those around them. This process is guided by an ideal standard of social interaction and representation that one has developed over time (Muris & Meesters, 21). If the outcome of this standardized evaluation “is favorable and the person perceives that the situation is signaling acceptance or gaining face, the emotion of pride will be elicited. Yet, where the perceived outcome is unfavorable and signaling rejection or losing face, the self-conscious emotions of shame and guilt will be evoked (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, as cited in Muris & Meesters, 21).

It is with the understanding of self-esteem and its relationship to social interaction that one may begin to see how these self-conscious emotions play a role in apologies. If one perceives the outcome of an identity-relevant event as unfavorable, triggering feelings of shame and guilt, they may then feel compelled to make an apology. This is defined as the transgressor experience. The transgressor being the individual who violated a certain standard. On the other hand is the experience of the victim. The victim is the individual who feels as though their own personal standards have been violated, either directly or indirectly by another. Because of this violation, they would expect an apology. This transgressor/victim relationship is necessary for the development of an apology.

Karina Schumann of the Stanford University Department of Psychology conducted a study revolving around the transgressor experience. She tested whether self-affirmation could

promote more effective apologies. Self-affirmation is the recognition and assertion of the existence and value of one's individual self. The idea of an “effective apology” is important because it presents the possibility of an ineffective apology. “Apology elements require transgressors to admit fault, recognize the harmful nature of their actions, promise change, convey emotions like shame or regret, and even offer a plea for forgiveness—all expressions that might diminish transgressors' sense of power and further threaten their self-integrity (Schumann 90). Self-affirmation builds self-integrity. And self-integrity is about being true to one's values and what one may stand for in life. Integrity is either built or destroyed by one's actions and the way in which they chose to conduct themselves within a social setting. Because people are highly motivated to maintain their sense of self-worth and integrity, whenever that self-integrity is threatened “transgressors are likely motivated to avoid associating themselves with wrongful actions” (Schumann 90).

Not only is avoidance a culprit for an ineffective apology, “Transgressors may also try to protect themselves from the negative consequences of committing an offense by responding with defensive strategies. These strategies include justifications (attempts to defend one's behavior), victim blaming (attempts to place some or all of the responsibility for the offense on the victim), excuses (attempts to mitigate responsibility for the offense), minimizations (attempts to downplay the consequences of one's actions), and denials (attempts to deny one's involvement in or the presence of an offense” (Schumann 90). Although these tactics of blame, justification, and denial initially seem to preserve the integrity of the transgressor, it creates an unsatisfactory apology for the victim.

As a result of her studies, Schumann found that “self-affirmation increased long term relational security by reducing defensiveness and promoting more effective responses to negative

behaviors” (Schumann 95). The process of self-affirmation forces one to reflect “on core values, allow[ing] people to adopt a more expansive view of the self, weakening the implications of a threat to their self-integrity. With their self-integrity intact, they can bypass defensive behaviors aimed at protecting the self from the threat” (Schumann 91). With the transgressor focused on the bigger-picture, they are able to see “their offense in the context of a global narrative of self-integrity, which would then allow them to focus on the needs of the victim and the relationship, rather than the need to protect their self-integrity” (Schumann 91). It is apparent here that the relationship to self is important to the ways in which one navigates their social landscape and interpersonal relationships.

Not only is one’s relationship to self incredibly important for a successful apology, so too is the relationship to the opposing party. Forgiveness, defined by the The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley is the conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you. There is a common misconception that forgiveness is a necessary component in a successful apology. Although sometimes preferred, it is not always required and comes down to the needs of the victim within the relationship.

In an article written by Adrienne M. Martin on the Power of Apology, she explains how “an apology can succeed in providing a decisive reason to forgive” (Martin 537) as well as how an “apology can provide a reason to maintain a relationship with someone whom one reasonably does not forgive” (Martin 537). Here she establishes the difference between the two main types of apologies: those that place the feelings of resentment and responsibility of forgiveness on the victim and those that consider interpersonal relationships while ultimately placing the same responsibilities on the transgressor. The discernible difference between the two is forgiveness.

Forgiveness, or the lack thereof, presents problems in the apology process because it asks for a reason. This reason refers to the justification in how we feel and causes apologies to take on a manipulative characteristic. This is because one often finds that “what we believe or feel or do is inconsistent with what we believe we have reason to believe or feel or do” (Martin 534). This is the power of an apology with which Martin is interested. In order to understand this difference, she establishes two different types of apologies and their relationships to reason and forgiveness.

The first kind of apology Martin defines is The Insult Account. The Insult Account is an apology relationship in which a decisive reason to forgive is established. It addresses the issue of forgiveness regarding the fact that it “entails the forswearing of resentment, even while the deed forgiven is believed to be wrong” (Martin 537). The Insult Account shows how “one can be rational in ceasing to resent a deed, without revising one’s judgement that the deed was wrong and that the wrongdoer was a responsible agent at the time” (Martin 537). This establishes the difference between forgiveness and total excuse of action. Martin established three central claims for this type of forgiveness to be appropriate: “First, wrongful deeds *insult* their victims’ worth. Second, resentment is a kind of *internal protest* against this insult. Third, a successful apology *retracts* the insult” (Martin 538). These claims establish the need for an initial insult, for this insult to cause internal conflict within the victim, and for the insult to be withdrawn by the transgressor. This internal struggle is key as it highlights that the resentment “targets neither the deed nor its wrongness but the insulting message about the victims’ worth” (Martin 538). The ability to see this resentment as an inward facing issue “makes room for both the victim and the wrongdoer to continue believing the act was wrong, while also rationally believing resentment is unfounded” (Martin 538). This relates back to how important one’s relationship to self is in the ability to effectively give and receive an apology.

The second kind of apology Martin defines as The Strawsonian Account. This apology relationship differs in its addressing of resentment. While The Insult Account sees resentment as an internal reflection of the victim, The Strawsonian Account views it more as an outward facing, transgressor-related experience, where “resentment targets the wrongdoer’s failure to satisfy a normative expectation for a certain degree and kind of goodwill or regard” (Martin 541). This basic demand for regard differs across certain kinds of relationships, often taken more seriously within closer, interpersonal relationships. Martin provides the example: “I do not expect someone on the street in New York City to make eye contact and smile in passing, but I do expect this of someone on the street in a small town; I will feel a twinge of resentment if the latter brushes past without acknowledging me” (Martin 543). This range of demands can be quite broad depending on the specific circumstance.

Take for example, the relationship one may have with a colleague. A certain level of professional respect would be given and expected. Because of these differing levels, “it is better to say that you have a *normative expectation* of attention to and respect... rather than a *demand*” (Martin 543). Martin even goes so far as to say that “interpersonal relationships are *defined* by the norms that tell us how to live up to the basic normative expectations within different relationships” (Martin 544). It is when these normative expectations are broken that an apology is sought.

To relate this back to The Strawsonian Account, and ideas of resentment, in the case that one fails to live up to a certain normative expectation, “resentment is a response to the perception of inadequate interpersonal commitment” (Martin 545). Much like The Insult Account, Martin established three central claims, but asks them specifically of the wrongdoer. She asks that they “*own* the wrongful deed - to acknowledge that the deed was wrong and the product of her

inadequate interpersonal commitment; to *regret* the deed and the inadequacy of her commitment; and to *repair* her commitment or demonstrate that she has repaired it” (Martin 545). It is this series of owning, regretting, and repairing that will lead to a successful apology and achievement of genuine forgiveness. This is the precise situation in which the victim may be able to forgive while still believing what the transgressor did was wrong. This is because “resentment’s primary target is the wrongdoer’s inadequate interpersonal commitment, as an ongoing state. If one is persuaded that the wrongdoer now has an adequate commitment... and properly appreciate the norms she flouted - then resentment no longer has its primary target” (Martin 545).

In summary, Martin provides that “an apology typically includes saying one knows one flouted a legitimate norm and regrets it” (Martin 546). Moreover, a promise to do better typically works to make amends and diminish any resentment from the victim or guilt of the transgressor. The ability to achieve this type of apology has become “highly ritualized” because it is “such a basic need within interpersonal human interaction to be able to satisfy this complex expectation” (Martin 547). She explains how apologies tend to take on a performative element “that goes beyond demonstrating that resentment's expectation has been satisfied - namely, a pseudo-contract with the recipient; a second-personal, remorseful taking of ownership; and a commitment to self-repair which thereby becomes a commitment to you-me repair, or repair of our relationship” (Martin 547). This promise to do better can often come without an apology, and in this case “forgiveness in the absence of apology can be perfectly reasonable; indeed, holding onto resentment because one has not received an apology, even when resentment’s normative expectations has been met, is *unreasonable*” (Martin 547). In discussion of Martin’s findings it can be seen how apologies and the accompanying resentment and forgiveness look different

depending on the desired outcome, the self-awareness of the victim, the responsibility of the transgressor and the impact on the varied types of interpersonal relationships.

Due to the varying nature of apologies, and all of the differing factors that go into the making of one, further research can be conducted regarding the varieties of the forgiveness experience. In an article titled: *The Varieties of Forgiveness Experience: Working toward a Comprehensive Definition of Forgiveness* published by the Journal of Health and Religion, forgiveness is defined not as a monologue, but a dialogue. The ability to form an effective apology that both relieves the guilt of the transgressor and heals the hurt of the victim is enriched by the back and forth nature of the forgiveness experience. Two of the authors of the aforementioned article, draw attention to two additional processes that are manifested by this experience, “(1) the reduction of negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and (2) the enhancement of positive thoughts , feelings, and behaviors” (Worthington, 2005, and McCullough et al. 2000, as cited in Lawler-Row et al, 235). This exchange of negative feelings in return for positive feelings is the main motivation behind the making and receiving of an apology and serves as one of the main motivators for any forgiveness experience.

In order to break down this complex experience, Lawler-Row, Scott, Raines, Edlis-Matityahou, and More from the Journal of Religion and Health conduct a study that categorizes “the responses of a large group of young adults with regard to betrayal experiences, reasons for forgiveness and their definitions of forgiveness” (Lawler-Row et al, 238). They begin by establishing a set of questions regarding the underlying nature of forgiveness. The first being whether or not the participant considers the overall process to be an interpersonal or intrapersonal experience. Second, how the participant values enhancement of the positive, in

relation to the passive release of negative responses. And third, what contextual factors the participants feel play into the definitions of forgiveness.

Their participants were made up of “270 college students... recruited from an introductory psychology student population at a large, public, nondenominational university. They ranged in age from 18 to 33.. There were 95 males and 173 females” (Lawler-Row et al, 238). The participants were asked to recall a time when they were the victim of some level of hurt and betrayal and whether or not they were able to forgive their transgressor. “The goal was to activate with intuitions of forgiveness, rather than memorized or purely linguistic. By having participants first describe a time when they forgave, they hoped to activate any underlying forgiveness schemata” (Lawler-Row et al, 239).

As a result of their research their findings concluded that “45.6% of the participants found their experience to be intrapersonal (focused on the self), 31.1% found it to be interpersonal (focused on the offender) and 20.4% found it to be a combination of the two. (Lawler-Row et al, 240). From this, one is able to conclude that the forgiveness experience is more often seen as a personal experience that requires self-reflection. They also found that the participants valued the enhancement of positive emotions fairly evenly to the passive release of negative emotions. With results being disunited, it is fair to say that the forgiveness experience is unique to each individual. When participants were asked to identify the contextual factors that play into the definitions of forgiveness, it was concluded that the word "wrong" was used by 22 (8%) of the participants and the word "mistake" by 18 (7%). Additionally, 9 (3%) framed forgiveness as a response to an apology, such as "accepting an apology" and 13 (5%) more included realizing that the offender was "sorry". Thus, for 22 (8%) individuals, the context of offender remorse and apology entered into their definitions” (Lawler-Row et al, 244). With the

responses once again, differing greatly, it can be concluded that the forgiveness experience is a unique process, highly specific to the individuals involved.

Up to this point, much of the topics covered have addressed apologies and forgiveness in a sentimental light, taking into consideration feelings, emotions, personal relationships, and guilt. However, what happens when the apology process is placed within the context of an institution? As summarized by Christopher Kutz of the California Law Review, “emotional forgiveness is a change in the forgiver's attitudes and emotions, grounded in a judgment that her claims against a wrongdoer have been released” (1651). If we maintain this framework, insisting that sentimentality is necessary for the process of forgiveness to take place, then the possibility that forgiveness can exist within an institutionalized space is minimized. Kutz defines this as problematic as “it links our notion of forgiveness too tightly to the concept of love and mercy, sentimentalizing a social process that can occur in the absence of affect” (1652). Additionally, “it gratuitously forgoes the core aim that law, in its generality, enables groups as well as individuals to release valid claims” (Kutz, 1652). He continues by stating that because of this, one should “treat the institutional case as the central example of forgiveness and the sentimental case as the more puzzling one” (Kutz, 1652). He later rationalizes this view as sentimental thought complicates an issue that could otherwise be quite simple and solved using a system of categorical questions and straightforward function (Kutz, 1652). By removing morality from the equation, the scope of the forgiveness process greatly decreases, taking away the variability introduced by each individual involved.

The sentimentalizing of what can be seen as a societal process can be viewed as the cause for the variety of apologies. They can range from sincere to opportunistic, simply based on the desired outcome, as well as the involvement of emotions and moral standings. In an article

written by Jorette L. Marshall on *The Politics of Apology and Forgiveness*, several examples are presented where apologies and forgiveness are impacted by, and occasionally suffer from, the power functions of larger political realities. Take for example, politicians. There is a parallel process of imploring voters to recognize that they are truly sorry for what they have done, with the implication that egregious acts do not have a negative or prohibitive impact on their ability to govern” (Marshall 489). Or how “Religious and denominational leaders seek ways to apologize for any role their ancestors played in distorting or destroying the culture and humanity of others” (Marshall 489). Although these statements are identifiable as apologies, they achieve only enough so that political integrity and social power is maintained, rather than truly rectifying the situation. The desired outcome plays a major role in the way an apology is executed.

Starting with the ideas of self-esteem and identity learned through a study of developmental psychopathology, apologies can be seen as one of the most pervasive, yet complicated societal norms. They act as a reflection of one’s relationship to self, as well as the value that is held within interpersonal relationships. They are difficult to define or categorize simply due to their unique nature. Synonymous with apologies is the forgiveness experience, which is defined by the desired outcome of the victim and the transgressor. Apologies and forgiveness are complex in nature and require careful consideration of all parties and situations.

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