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ABSTRACT

Studies suggest that apologies are beneficial (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982) and lead to positive outcomes such as forgiveness (e.g., Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010), positive feelings toward the transgressor (e.g., DeCremer, van Dijk, & Pillutla, 2010), and reduced sentencing in legal cases (e.g., Robbennolt, 2003). These findings have been supported within close relationships, business-consumer relationships, and employer-employee relationships, but have not yet been explored within professor-student relationships. The aftermath of a mistake is a critical moment and carries particular weight in students' overall perceptions of their professors (e.g., Tucker, 2006). The purpose of the current study is to compare students' perceptions of professors who apologize to those who don't. Using a vignette methodology, I found that students' perceptions of the professor differed between a non-apologetic condition and apologetic condition. In addition, results revealed that male, not female, professors were perceived to be better transformational leaders when they gave an apology, while female professors were perceived more negatively in terms of service quality in the apologetic condition.

Introduction

Research suggests that leader apologies are critical in rebuilding and sustaining long-term relationships (e.g., Kim et al., 2004). An apology consists of the transgressor admitting to the wrongdoing, accepting responsibility, expressing empathy, offering penance, and promising not to repeat the mistake in the future. Sincere apologies occur rather infrequently in organizations. Possibly because organizational leaders believe they will be more vulnerable to criticism if they apologize. However, this assumption is incorrect. Studies suggest that leaders who voluntarily apologize for their mistakes can make a powerful impression on followers who did not expect an apology (e.g., Tucker, 2006). Apologizing positively influences follower perceptions of leaders and helps build relationships rather than destroying them (e.g., Tucker, 2006). Research has been conducted related to leader-follower relations and apology effectiveness, however little research, if any, has examined students' perceptions of professors who apologize. Most studies include participants of equal role status or in organizational settings.

What are the Components of an Apology?

An apology acts as a tool used to respond to perceived offenses or misunderstandings. The transgressor has the opportunity to admit the act was wrong, accept responsibility for the offence, express empathy, offer penance, and/or promise not to repeat the untoward behavior in the future (Goffman, 1971; Schmitt et al., 2004). Across disciplines such as marketing, management, psychology, and law, researchers find apologies can consist of a range of components including compensation, expressions of empathy, and an explanation of what happened. Compensation refers to offering the apology recipient a good (e.g., a refund) to restore balance. An example of this could be a

form of payment or anything of value to counterbalance the mistake. If the transgressor feels they need to generate forgiveness and enhance their future relationship with the victim, then they may offer empathy. Empathy is the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another person of either the past or present. For example, an empathetic apology would consist of the transgressor acknowledging the full impact of their actions and sincerely saying they are sorry to that other person. An apology can also include non-verbal components such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. Finally, an apologizer could offer an explanation. An example of this would include the apologizer explaining why the mistake or failure happened so the victim understands why the apologizer had behaved in that harmful way.

Are Apologies Effective?

Research shows that apologies are complex speech acts, which can have a range of positive effects, including triggering forgiveness, restoring trust, reducing aggression, enhancing future relationship closeness, and promoting well-being (e.g., Hodgins and Liebeskind, 2003; Writvliet et al., 2002). Some of these outcomes were found in a recent study that investigated apologies and transformational leadership. Tucker (2006) conducted a vignette study involving all respondents reacting to the same scenario with the supervisor apologizing in one condition or not apologizing in the other. The results revealed leaders who apologized for mistakes are perceived as more transformational than leaders who did not apologize for their mistakes (e.g., Tucker, 2006).

This research discussed above has yet to look at apologies in higher education. The purpose of the current work is to examine students' perceptions of professors who

apologize. Given the findings above, I propose:

Hypothesis 1: Students will be more forgiving of professors when an apology is provided versus when no apology is given.

Hypothesis 2: Professors who apologize (versus those who do not) will be perceived as more transformational than professors who do not apologize for mistakes.

Hypothesis 3: Professors who apologize (versus those who do not) will be perceived as more competent than professors who do not apologize for mistakes.

Hypothesis 4: Professors who apologize for mistakes will be perceived as more trustworthy and caring (as measured by service quality) than professors who do not apologize for mistakes.

These dependent variables were selected because these variables show to be affected by apologies in other types of relationships such as firm-customer relationships (e.g., Hodgins and Liebeskind, 2003; Writvliet et al., 2002). Previous studies examined the general effects of apologies, the examination of leader-follower relations, and apologies involving individuals of equal role status. Some results offer strong support that apologizing after wrongdoing is related to higher perceptions of transformational leadership (e.g., Tucker, 2006). It is possible these results may differ in student-professor relationships.

Methods

Overview

To test these hypotheses, I developed a vignette set in the context of an undergraduate classroom. All participants began the study by reading a vignette in which a professor made a mistake (see Appendix 1 for vignette). Next, participants were randomly assigned to either an apology or no apology condition (see Appendix 2). In the apology condition, the professor was depicted as taking responsibility for the mistake, expressing empathy and asking for forgiveness. This apology includes all of the components found to be effective in the marketing and psychology literatures (e.g., Hausman and Mader, 2004; Hodgins, Liebeskind, & Schwartz, 1996). Each condition had 30 participants. After reading the vignette and subsequent apology or non-apology, participants completed a manipulation check and then rated the professor on forgiveness, transformational leadership, competence, and service quality. Participants also responded to a demographics questionnaire.

Participants

Sixty Bridgewater State University students participated in this vignette study. There were no limitations related to demographics. Students took the survey by approaching me at a table I set up in Bridgewater State University's Rondileau Campus Center. I drew in students with signs on the table explaining the research study, how it was only a five-minute time commitment, and that they would be rewarded five dollars after they completed it. I applied for and fortunately received a grant of three hundred dollars from BSU's Office of Undergraduate Research. This grant easily allowed me to gather sixty participants for my study. I also took advantage of my time by having some students

complete the survey before and after my business management classes. The participants

completed the survey remotely by smartphone or personal computer. The questionnaire

was taken on the software program Qualtrics, The World's Leading Research & Insights

Platform. The majority of the participants were under twenty-three years old (79%). All

participants received five dollars in cash as compensation for their participation. Sixty-six

percent of the participants were female, and thirty-four percent were male. The GPA of

the students averaged out to a 3.25. The majority of the participants were seniors (72%).

Instruments

Manipulation Check. To confirm that the apology manipulation worked, participants

were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements 1) "the professor

made a mistake," 2) "the professor provided a sincere apology," and 3) "this situation is

plausible." Responses to all of these questions were given on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7

(*strongly agree*) scale.

Forgiveness. To measure forgiveness, the Transgression-Related Interpersonal

Motivations Inventory scale (McCullough et al., 1998) was used. The eleven items were

adapted to fit the situation (see Appendix 4 for the items). Forgiveness is defined as the

forgoing of vengeful behavior (McCullough et al., 1998). For example, one item stated,

"I would keep as much distance between Professor Young and I as possible."

Participants responded on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale.

Transformational leadership. To measure transformational leadership a modified

version of Carless et. al. (2000) seven-item Global Transformational Leadership scale

was used (see Appendix 3 for the items). This scale was chosen because of its

conciseness and universality. Transformational leadership is primarily defined as the

focus on follower development and includes four specific leader characteristics: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (e.g., Tucker, 2006). Transformational leaders pay attention to their followers' unique needs and abilities (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999). The seven items were adapted to fit the situation. For example, one item was re-worded to state: "My professor treats students as individuals, supports and encourages their development." Participants responded on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale.

Service Quality. The Social Aspects of Professional Service scale (Hausman & Mader, 2004) was used to measure service quality. Six, five point Likert-type items are used to measure the degree to which a customer believes a service provider is trustworthy and caring based on a recent customer. Hausman (2004) used the scale in the patient-physician context and referred to it as Social Aspects of Professional Service. The adjusted six items included, "I trust my professor's judgment," "I feel my professor accepts me for who I am," "My professor appears sympathetic to my problems," "My professor seems to care about me," "My professor is honest with me," and finally "My professor is very attentive with me." Participants responded on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale.

Competence. The Competence of the Employee scale (Dolen et al., 2002) was used to measure perceptions of professor competence. Six, seven-point Likert-type items are used to assess the degree to which a student believes that a professor performed efficiently and effectively. The context examined by Dolen et al. (2002) involved a shopper and a salesperson in a retail store. The six items were adapted to fit the situation. The adjusted six items included: "The professor is capable," "The professor is efficient,"

"The professor is organized," "The professor is thorough," "The professor met my needs," and "The professor performed as I expected." Participants responded on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale.

Professor gender. To assess perceptions of gender, participants were asked, "What gender do you believe the professor in the vignette is?"

Results

Manipulation Check

In the apology manipulation check, participants were asked to what extent do they agree or disagree that the professor made a mistake, provided a sincere apology, and believed the situation was plausible. Overall participants believed the professor had made a mistake *(M = 6.03)* and that the situation seemed plausible *(M = 5.48)*. Furthermore, participants were more likely to believe that a sincere apology had been offered in the apology condition ($M = 5.93$) than the no apology condition ($M = 4.43$, $t (59)= -4.158$, $p = .000$).

Willingness to Forgive

My first hypothesis was students will be more forgiving of professors when an apology is provided versus when no apology is given. To test this a t-test was completed comparing those in the apology condition to those in the non-apology condition on forgiveness. This hypothesis was not supported. Students in the apology condition were not more forgiving of the professor ($M = 5.71$) than those in the non-apology condition ($M = 5.56$, $t (59) = -.461$, $p = .646$).

Transformational leadership perceptions

My second hypothesis was: professors who apologize (versus those who do not) will be perceived as more transformational than professors who do not apologize for mistakes. This hypothesis was supported: professors who apologized were rated by students as more transformational ($M = 4.94$) than those who did not ($M = 4.13$), $t(59) = -2.657$, $p = .010$.

Competence

My third hypothesis was: professors who apologize (versus those who do not) will be perceived as more competent than professors who do not apologize for mistakes. This hypothesis was not supported. Students in the apology condition did not believe the professor was more competent ($M = 3.71$) than those in the non-apology condition ($M = 4.08$, $t(59) = 1.24$, $p = .219$).

Service quality perceptions

My final hypothesis was professors who apologize for mistakes will be perceived as more trustworthy and caring (as measured by service quality) than professors who do not apologize for mistakes. This hypothesis was not supported and in fact we found the opposite occurred. Students rated professors who apologized as worse ($M = 2.96$) than those who did not apologize ($M = 3.59$, $t(59) = 2.194$, $p = .032$).

Gender perceptions

Sixty-eight percent of the participants perceived the professor in the vignette as male, and thirty-two percent of the respondents perceived the professor as female. In the study, if a student believed the professor was male, the professor was rated as more transformational if he apologized than if he did not (see Table 1). There were no

significant differences between the two conditions on forgiveness, service quality, or competence. Interestingly, a different result emerged for the professor when the students perceived or saw her as female. Students judged a female professor more negatively in terms of service quality in the apology condition versus the non-apology condition (see Table 2). No such gender differences were found for transformational leadership, forgiveness, or competence.

Discussion

This study represents a first attempt to examine student assessments of professors after they apologize for a mistake. I found that male, but not female, professors who apologize for their mistakes are perceived to be more transformational than those who do not. Female, but not male, professors who apologize are perceived more negatively in terms of service quality. My study did not compare males to females, I investigated gender separately and compared apology to no apology regarding the perceptions of the professor's gender. My findings introduce an entire new research topic to be investigated in perceptions of professors regarding gender and apologies.

As the vignette was situated in a classroom context dealing with a professor-student issue, both internal and ecological validity were enhanced. There has been much research conducted relating to leader-follower relations and apology effectiveness (e.g., Tucker, 2006). However, this research study has focused specifically on students' perceptions of professors who apologize for mistakes in the classroom. Professors would benefit from this study because it would help explain students' attitudes towards them after a mistake was made and/or an apology was given.

The students' perceptions of male versus female differences reveal results that were

not expected. This is different than the relationship typically found in the apology literature, typically apologies work for all (e.g., Tucker, 2006). Male professors were rated higher in transformational leadership after apologizing, while female professors were rated lower in terms of service quality in the apologetic condition. These findings are somewhat surprising given findings from other studies suggest that females are generally rated higher in transformational leadership (Eagly et al., 2003). One possible explanation is that we created an apology that was better suited for males than for females. Female leaders may apologize in a qualitatively different way than male leaders and indeed, apology research suggests this to be the case (e.g., Hodgins and Liebeskind, 2003). Research suggests that perceptions of women are more strongly affected by expressions of responsibility and regret than those of men (Tata, 2000). Thus, students' perceptions of male or female professors may be altered if physical behavior was known.

This finding is similar to research findings on gender and evaluations where females are also perceived more negatively (Basow and Silberg 1987; Bianchini et al., 2012, Summer et al. 1996). However, researchers believe this may depend on the gender composition of the class, with students rating instructors of their same gender more favorably (Centra and Gaubatz 2000). Applied to the current study, it may be the case that female students would rate the female professors more favorably post-apology.

Furthermore, studies also suggest the type of course being instructed can influence students' perception of their professor. Female instructors in business and electronic courses are perceived overall more negatively with a larger male student body (Bianchini et al., 2012). This might provide insight as to why female professors who apologize are perceived more negatively.

Limitations and directions for future research

There is a need for more research on apologies, more specifically on the role of apologies in higher education between professors and students. We know very little about what professors actually think about apologizing to students. Qualitative research on responses to critical moments with the student and the classroom would provide insight into areas such as consequences of students' perceptions of professors before and after an apology is offered.

Second, more research is needed in real life settings with a larger number of participants. With all vignette studies, there are questions about whether participants respond in the same way to the hypothetical situation as they would to one in real life (e.g., Tucker, 2006). In field studies set in real life, the professor may show emotional or physical expressions during an apology and this may alter the students' overall perception of the professor. Moving research on apologies in classroom contexts into the field, will provide opportunities to externally validate the effects of professors' physical or emotional expressions during apologies on their students' perceptions of them (e.g., Tucker, 2006). Also, in a field setting, there can be a form of penance offered to the students in the apology condition. Instead of money in this type of scenario, it can be extra credit given on the exam or a future exam. Two studies found that this specific element of apology has a particularly strong effect (Bottom et al., 2002; Schmitt et al., 2004). Any form of penance following an apology has the opportunity to drastically alter the victim's perception of the transgressor.

In this study a minor error was committed by the professor. It would be interesting to examine this relationship after errors of a more severe nature occurred. For example,

what would occur if the professor unintentionally offended a student based off their race or gender. This more intensified unprofessional mistake of the professor may completely alter the students' perceptions of them. The physical and emotional expressions of the apology or apologies, if given, may alter the degree to which the students felt aggrieved or not by the professor's actions.

This study would be interesting to continue by examining the results in terms of the gender of the student. Some studies reveal that female students see female instructors as better organized, better communicators, more interactive, and providing higher quality exams, assignments, and feedback to students (Centra and Gaubatz 2000). Similar results are found comparing male students' perceptions of male professors. Results may vary in female-female, male-male, female-male, and male-female relationships because one could argue students' perceptions may be reflected from a professor's teaching technique (Centra and Gaubatz 2000). I believe the differences in teaching style of a male professor versus a female professor, or vice versa, have the ability to impact the student's perception of the professor of the same gender. Unfortunately, I was unable to explore this because of my small sample size.

Conclusion

This research contributes insight into how students assess professors' apologies and how these assessments impact their perceptions of those professors. At least in the classroom, our analyses suggest that students view male, but not female, professors as more transformational leaders if they provide a sincere apology. Also, our study suggests that students view female, but not male, professors more negatively in terms of service quality if they provide a sincere apology. This study opens new areas for continued

exploration. Pursuing this research through field studies set in real life, will allow the opportunity to analyze the effects of professors' physical or emotional expressions during apologies on their students' perceptions of them. Overall, further research into additional contexts will develop a better understanding of apologies in higher education.

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Table 1

T-tests comparing no apology to apology conditions with male professor

Dependent Variable	No Apology Mean	Apology Mean	t	p
Transformational Leadership	3.95	5.01	-2.576	**.014**
Forgiveness	5.55	5.66	-.227	.822
Service Quality	3.70	3.10	1.468	.151
Competence	4.05	3.82	.569	.573

Table 2

T-tests comparing no apology to apology conditions with female professor

Dependent Variable	No Apology Mean	Apology Mean	t	p
Transformational Leadership	4.41	4.91	-1.092	.291
Forgiveness	5.51	5.82	-.583	.568
Service Quality	3.47	2.73	2.153	**.047**
Competence	4.42	3.45	1.150	.267

Appendices

Appendix 1

Vignette

It is your junior year at Bridgewater State University and it is the third week into your Strategic Management course. It is taught by Professor Young who is supposed to be a fair and fun professor. You have been working hard throughout the beginning of the semester and like the professor and class thus far. You took your first Exam in the course last week and plan on getting back the grade today. You studied for an entire week and know you got an A. At the end of class on Friday, Professor Young gives the exam back when expected and you received a 65. Professor Young leaves immediately after passing out the grades because Young has a meeting to get to. You are shocked and plan on approaching Professor Young on Monday. The entire weekend was ruined because you thought you got an A on your first exam when you actually received a D. It affected your work and relationship. On Monday, Professor Young arrives to class and informs everyone that the test scores are incorrect.

Professor Young says:

Appendix 2

Apology versus Non-Apology Conditions

Non-Apology Condition	Professor Young says, "Somehow there was a system error and I scored your exams based on the wrong answer key. I will hand back the correct grades on Wednesday."
Apology Condition	Professor Young says, "This is completely my fault. I should have been more careful at looking at which answer key goes with which exam. There was a system error and I scored your exams based on the wrong answer key. I promise I will hand back correct grades on Wednesday. It won't happen again. If this weighed on you over the weekend, please accept my sincerest apology. Please email me for any questions."

Appendix 3

Carless et al.'s (2000) Global Transformational Leadership scale

1. My supervisor communicates a clear and positive vision of the future.

2. My supervisor treats staff as individuals, supports and encourages their development.

3. My supervisor gives encouragement and recognition to staff.

4. My supervisor fosters trust, involvement and cooperation among team members.

5. My supervisor encourages thinking about problems in new ways and questions assumptions.

6. My supervisor is clear about his/her values and practices what he/she preaches.

7. My supervisor instills pride and respect in others and inspires me by being highly competent.

Appendix 4

Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory Forgiveness Scale

(Following items adapted to survey)

1. I would forgive Professor Young.

2. I would wish that something bad would happen to Professor Young.

3. I would get even with Professor Young.

4. I would want to see Professor Young hurt and miserable.

5. I would keep as much distance between Professor Young and I as possible.

6. I would live as if Professor Young doesn't exist, isn't around.

7. I would not trust Professor Young.

8. I would find it difficult to act warmly toward Professor Young.

9. I would avoid Professor Young.

10. I would cut off the relationship with Professor Young.

11. I would withdraw from Professor Young.