Article

Does love mean never having to say you're sorry? Associations between relationship satisfaction, perceived apology sincerity, and forgiveness

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Abstract

Most past research on apologies examines participants' responses to imaginary transgressions or minor offenses against strangers. This research consequently neglects how the quality of pre-existing relationships might influence responses to apologies in everyday life. I examined whether relationship satisfaction moderated the association between apologies and forgiveness in romantic relationships by influencing perceptions of apology sincerity. Members of 60 married or cohabiting couples first assessed their relationship satisfaction. Participants then completed daily diaries, reporting transgressions by their partners, apologies by their partners, perceived apology sincerity, and willingness to forgive their partners. Apologies predicted forgiveness only for participants highly satisfied with their relationships. In addition, relationship satisfaction was positively associated with participants' ratings of the sincerity of the apologies, which in turn predicted forgiveness. The findings suggest that, relative to less satisfied individuals, highly satisfied individuals are more forgiving following apologies, because they regard their partners' apologies as sincere expressions of remorse.

Keywords

Apology, interpersonal relationships, forgiveness, sincerity, conflict resolution

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Scholars invest apologies with the power to resolve conflicts and mend frayed relationships (Gibney, Howard-Hassman, Coicaud, & Steiner, 2008; Lazare, 2004; Tavuchis, 1991). Several decades of research on the benefits of apologies suggests that they are effective at increasing victim forgiveness and reducing anger and aggression toward the transgressor (e.g., Bennett & Earwaker, 1994; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Exline, DeShea, & Holeman, 2007). Most researchers, however, study either partici-pants' responses to hypothetical scenarios or the effects of apologies for minor offenses committed against strangers. Researchers and theorists also focus on how the specific content or comprehensiveness of apologies influences their effectiveness (e.g., Day & Ross, 2011; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Forster, & Montada, 2004; Schumann & Ross, 2010). These studies do not consider how the pre-existing relation-ship between the transgressor and the victim affects victims' responses to apologies. I aimed to go beyond past research by studying real-world responses to apologies occur-ring in the context of important ongoing close relationships. The major goal of the pres-ent study was to determine whether the influence of apologies on forgiveness depends on the quality of the pre-existing relationship between the transgressor and the victim.

Past research suggests that individuals in high-quality romantic relationships – relation-ships that are characterized by high levels of satisfaction, closeness, and commitment – are more willing to forgive their partners' transgressions (Allemand, Amberg, Zimprich, & Fincham, 2007; Finkel, Rushbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Kearns & Fincham, 2005; McCullough et al., 1998; Molden & Finkel, 2010). In a set of studies using hypothe-tical, remembered, and daily offenses, experimentally primed relational commitment (Study 1) and measured relational commitment (Studies 2 and 3) predicted greater forgiveness of one's romantic partner (Finkel et al., 2002). In studies using remembered offenses, forgive-ness was predicted by greater relationship satisfaction (Allemand et al., 2007), relation-ship quality (Kearns & Fincham, 2005), and closeness to one's partner (McCullough et al., 1998). These studies suggest that the link between relationship quality and forgive-ness is robust, but they do not examine this link when an apology is or is not present. Thus, in the current research, I tested whether one important aspect of relationship qual-ity – relationship satisfaction – influences forgiveness following apologies. Using a daily diary method, I examined whether apologies promote forgiveness differentially for individuals who are more versus less satisfied with their romantic relationship.

Although I could find no published research comparing the effects of apologies for individuals differing in relationship satisfaction, there is considerable speculation about this issue in the popular media. In *Love Story*, novelist Erich Segal (1970) wrote the well-known line: "love means never having to say you're sorry." Segal's quote produces over 14 million hits on Google and a great deal of contention. A line from the comedy film *What's Up Doc?* illustrates some commentators' reactions to Segal's quote. The heroine repeats Segal's "love means never having to say you're sorry" line, only to have her romantic partner respond with: "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard."

Psychological research appears to offer a degree of support for a slightly watered down version of Segal's quote. Apologies might offer little additional benefit to indi-viduals who are highly satisfied with their relationships. These individuals might be inclined to forgive their partners regardless of whether they have apologized for their

offenses. Consistent with this prediction, individuals in higher quality relationships are more likely to empathize with their partner and make more benign attributions for their partners' transgressions, both of which ultimately predict greater forgiveness (Kearns & Fincham, 2005; McCullough et al., 1998). In contrast, dissatisfied couples may have more to gain by engaging in relationship-enhancing behaviors, such as apologies. Unlike satisfied couples, dissatisfied couples cannot rely on the goodwill generated by their previous history to offset the current transgression and mitigate their partners' anger. Apologies may thus promote greater forgiveness in these less satisfied couples. This prediction is consistent with Ho's (2007) hypothesis – tested with strangers playing a trust game – that the impact of apologies is greater when a victim is uncertain about the quality of the transgressor's character. Similarly, Gottman (e.g., 1994) has long argued that dissatisfied couples can restore relationship well-being by engaging in the relationship-enhancing behaviors observed among satisfied couples. Thus, apologies might be most successful at increasing forgiveness in close relationships that could use a boost to promote well-being.

However, there is perhaps even more evidence in the psychological literature that Segal might have had it backwards. Apologies might be more effective in better relationships. Past research has demonstrated that apologies that people identify as sincere are more successful at increasing reconciliation than apologies that people regard as insincere (Hatcher, 2011; Risen & Gilovich, 2007; Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004; Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004). Similarly, marriage and family therapists who promote the value of apologizing emphasize that an apology must be sincere and heartfelt for it to be effective at improving relationship well-being (e.g., Miller, 2011). In stressing the importance of sincerity, researchers and therapists argue that the content of transgressors' apologies matters (e.g., Hatcher, 2011; Miller, 2011). A more comprehensive apology might be required, as a mere "I'm sorry" might be insufficient. This focus on "words" overlooks the possibility that a victim's preexisting attitude toward the transgressor may be a major determinant of the perceived sincerity of an apology. In the context of intimate relationships, individuals who are more satisfied with their relationships may be more likely to judge their partners' apologies as genuine and heartfelt expressions of regret than would individuals in less satisfied relationships. Consistent with this hypothesis, satisfied couples expect and exhibit more positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors from and toward each other (Margolin & Wampold, 1981; McNulty, 2010). In contrast, less satisfied couples are more likely to expect and exhibit negative responses from and toward each other (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Members of these less satisfied couples might therefore be more likely to regard an apology as insincere or contrived. Thus, in the present study, I assessed whether individuals in more satisfied relationships regard their partners' apologies as more sincere regardless of the comprehensiveness of the apologies, and whether sincerity, in turn, predicts willingness to forgive.

It is also possible that the effectiveness of apologies might vary with relationship satisfaction, because the quality of the apologies received differs. A comprehensive apology may contain as many as eight distinguishable elements (Bavelas, 2004; Lazare, 2004; Scher & Darley, 1997): remorse (e.g., "I'm sorry"); acceptance of responsibility (e.g., "It's my fault"); admission of wrongdoing (e.g., "I shouldn't have done that"); acknowledgment of harm (e.g., "I know you're hurt"); forbearance, or a promise to

behave better (e.g., "I will never do it again"); request for forgiveness (e.g., "Please don't be mad at me"); offer of repair (e.g., "I'll make it up to you); and explanation (e.g., "I'm late because I was stuck in traffic"). Studies using hypothetical vignettes indicate that more comprehensive apologies are more effective at improving evaluations of the transgressor and promoting forgiveness (Scher & Darley, 1997; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Forster, & Montada, 2004). It is unclear how or whether apology comprehensiveness might vary with relationship satisfaction. Conceivably, individuals in more satisfied relationships offer more comprehensive apologies, because they empathize more with their partners. Alternatively, individuals in less satisfied relationships may offer more comprehensive apologies because they fear for their relationships. I examined whether apology comprehensiveness varies with relationship satisfaction, and whether this variation could explain associations between relationship satisfaction, perceived apology sincerity, and forgiveness.

I further examined the influence of perceptions of offense severity. Victims are more inclined to forgive offenses that they perceive as minor rather than severe (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). It is conceivable that offense severity varies systematically either in actuality or perception with relationship satisfaction, and that this association influences responses to apologies.

Study overview

In an initial phase of the present study, married or cohabiting couples evaluated their relationship satisfaction. Several days after providing their satisfaction ratings, participants individually completed daily diaries in which they reported any offenses that their partner had committed against them that day. I assessed whether apologies were more strongly associated with forgiveness among individuals who rated their relationships as relatively low versus high in satisfaction. Further, I examined whether victims' relationship satisfaction was associated with their evaluations of apology sincerity, and whether these sincerity ratings, in turn, predicted forgiveness. Finally, I tested whether relationship satisfaction was associated with apology comprehensiveness and offense severity. I then tested whether the observed associations between relationship satisfaction, perceived apology sincerity, and forgiveness remained significant when statistically controlling for apology comprehensiveness and offense severity.

Method

Participants

Sixty women and 60 men ($M_{age} = 27.06$, $SD = 4.07$) from 60 married or cohabiting couples participated in exchange for US$25 gift certificates to Amazon. Couples were recruited using a graduate student listserv at a Canadian university. Thirty-five (58.33%) couples indicated that they were married, seven (11.67%) that they were in common-law relationships, seven (11.67%) that they were engaged and cohabiting, and eleven (18.33%) that they were cohabiting (i.e., described themselves as living

together but not married, common-law, or engaged). The mean relationship length was 4.93 years ($SD = 2.89$ years), with a range of 9 months to 14 years.[1]

Materials and procedure

Participants completed all materials individually online. Each participant first completed a four-item measure of relationship satisfaction ("I am extremely happy with my current romantic relationship"; "I have a very strong relationship with my partner"; "I do not feel that my current relationship is successful" (reverse scored); "My relationship with my partner is very rewarding (i.e., gratifying, fulfilling)" (Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007). Participants responded to each item on a seven-point scale anchored at 1 (*not at all true*) and 7 (*completely true*). The four items were combined to create a reliable index of relationship satisfaction, $\alpha = .86$.

Approximately three days after completing the pre-diary questionnaire, participants were assigned a personal username and password that they used to sign in to their daily diaries. Participants were asked to complete their online diary privately every evening for seven consecutive nights. They were instructed to complete their entries in private, avoid discussing the content of their entries with their partner, and sign in to the diary even if they had no events to report. Upon signing in to their diary, participants were instructed to report any incidents from that day in which their romantic partner did something to them[2] that might have been considered "negative." For each event, participants reported what happened, how severe the offense was ("How severe were the consequences of your partner's actions for you?"), how much they had forgiven their partner ("To what extent have you forgiven your partner for this incident?"), and the extent to which they thought the incident was resolved ("To what extent do you think this incident has been resolved?"). Finally, they reported whether or not they received an apology. If so, they described the apology verbatim and rated its sincerity ("How sincere was your partner's apology?"). All rating scale responses were provided on seven-point scales. Participants terminated the session when they had no more events to report. After their seventh evening, participants completed demographics (e.g., gender, relationship status, and length), received a feedback letter and their compensation.

Two independent observers, blind to participant gender, coded the apologies for presence of the eight apology elements. Inter-observer reliability was high ($K = .89$); discrepancies between coders were resolved through discussion. The number of elements in each apology was also summed to represent its comprehensiveness. Finally, two independent observers categorized the offenses into four types, adapted from Holmes (1989): relational (e.g., hurting partner's feelings: 76.26%); failed obligation (e.g., neglecting one's chores: 9.71%); inconvenience (e.g., distracting partner from work: 11.51%); and physical/possession (e.g., bumping into partner; spending shared money without partner's approval: 2.52%). Inter-observer reliability was high ($K = .91$). Because the majority of offenses were coded as relational in nature, these events were further coded into five categories ($K = .82$): disagreeable behavior (e.g., being argumentative with partner; 24.10%); neglectful behavior (e.g., being inattentive to partner; 14.75%); selfish behavior (e.g., putting own needs first; 14.03%); hurtful comments (e.g., insulting partner; 12.23%); and nagging comments (e.g., urging partner to be more productive; 11.15%).

Results

Preliminary analyses

On average, participants signed on to complete a diary entry 6.67 of the 7 possible days ($SD = .95$). Participants reported an average of 2.32 ($SD = 1.89$, median = 3, range = 0–9) offenses each for a total of 278 offenses across the sample. All participants who reported at least one offense (104 participants: 56 women; 48 men) were included in the analyses reported here; the results did not change when we excluded those who reported the fewest offenses (i.e., below the median of 3 offenses). Relationship satisfaction ratings, which were obtained approximately three days prior to the start of the diary portion of the study, were high ($M = 6.17$, $SD = .90$), and were negatively associated with the number of offenses participants reported ($r = -.40$, $p < .001$). On average, participants rated the offenses committed against them as moderately severe, $M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.49$.

Participants reported receiving an apology for 30.94% of the offenses. The apologies that participants reported receiving from their partners included an average of 1.85 ($SD = .69$) apology elements. The element of remorse was included with the greatest frequency (91.86% of apologies), followed by explanation (36.05%), acceptance of responsibility (27.91%), admission of wrongdoing (6.98%), offer of repair (5.81%), forbearance (5.81%), acknowledgement of harm (1.16%), and request for forgiveness (0%).

I used linear mixed modeling analyses for all remaining statistical tests. Linear mixed modeling analyses take into account that events are nested within and unbalanced across participants and dyads, and allow predictor terms to be represented at both the level of the event and the person. Thus, for the present study, each offense was treated as a separate case in the analyses, while still accounting for non-independence in the data. All predictor variables were centered on the grand mean prior to being included in the analyses.

Linear mixed modeling analyses revealed that relationship satisfaction did not predict likelihood of receiving an apology or apology comprehensiveness, ts < 1 (with and without controlling for offense severity). However, relationship satisfaction predicted the presence of acceptance of responsibility and forbearance. Whereas individuals in more satisfied relationships were marginally more likely to report receiving an apology that included an acceptance of responsibility (parameter estimate = .09 ($SE = .05$), $t(54.31) = 1.80$, $p = .08$), individuals in less satisfied relationships were significantly more likely to report receiving an apology that included a statement of forbearance (parameter estimate = $-.07$ ($SE = .02$), $t(54.72) = -2.79$, $p = .007$). In addition, individuals in less satisfied relationships were more likely than individuals in more satisfied relationships to report receiving hurtful comments from their partner: parameter estimate = $-.05$ ($SE = .02$), $t(276) = -2.46$, $p = .02$.[3] Relationship satisfaction did not predict any other offense type, ps > .46.[4]

Main analyses

Within the sample of 278 offenses, I examined whether pre-existing relationship satisfaction was associated with the outcomes of apologies. Participants' ratings of
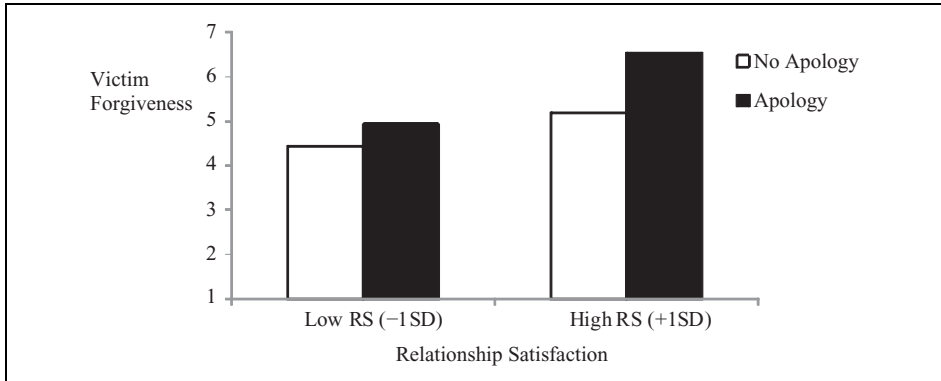
Figure 1. Forgiveness as a function of apology presence and relationship satisfaction (RS).

forgiveness and dispute resolution were highly correlated ($r = .71$, $p < .001$) and were combined to create a composite of forgiveness. Linear mixed modeling analyses revealed that apologies were positively associated with forgiveness: parameter estimate $= .93$ ($SE = .21$), $t(188.77) = 4.40$, $p < .001$. Relationship satisfaction was also positively associated with forgiveness: parameter estimate $= .35$ ($SE = .13$), $t(79.49) = 2.74$, $p = .008$. In addition, a significant interaction between apology presence and relationship satisfaction emerged: parameter estimate $= .52$ ($SE = .19$), $t(71.24) = 2.70$, $p = .009$ (see Figure 1). When victims rated their relationship as relatively low (-1 SD) in satisfaction, the presence of an apology was not significantly associated with increased forgiveness: parameter estimate $= .40$ ($SE = .27$), $t(59.70) = 1.49$, $p = .14$. When victims rated their relationship as relatively high ($+1$ SD) in satisfaction, however, the presence of an apology was strongly associated with increased forgiveness: parameter estimate $= 1.42$ ($SE = .28$), $t(105.80) = 5.14$, $p < .001$. Simple slope analyses revealed that relationship satisfaction was not significantly associated with forgiveness when an apology was absent, $t = 1.41$, $p = .16$. When an apology was present, however, relationship satisfaction was positively associated with forgiveness, $t = 4.33$, $p < .001$.

Relationship satisfaction was negatively associated with offense severity ratings: parameter estimate $= -.24$ ($SE = .12$), $t(86.55) = -2.03$, $p = .05$. However, the interaction between relationship satisfaction and apology presence on forgiveness remained significant after controlling for offense severity: parameter estimate $= .40$ ($SE = .18$), $t(162.88) = 2.16$, $p = .03$. When victims rated their relationship as relatively low in satisfaction, the presence of an apology was significantly associated with increased forgiveness if offense severity was controlled: parameter estimate $= .93$ ($SE = .27$), $t(232.10) = 3.49$, $p = .001$. However, the presence of an apology was even more strongly associated with increased forgiveness when victims rated their relationship as relatively high in satisfaction: parameter estimate $= 1.72$ ($SE = .27$), $t(110.31) = 6.31$, $p < .001$. Simple slope analyses while controlling for offense severity revealed that relationship satisfaction was not significantly associated with forgiveness when an apology was absent, $t = 1.11$, $p = .27$. When an apology was present, relationship satisfaction was
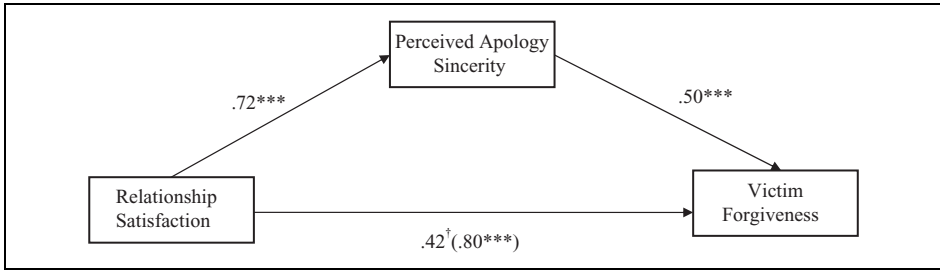
Figure 2. Mediation of the association between relationship satisfaction and victim forgiveness within events receiving an apology. *Note:* Path coefficients indicate the unstandardized parameter estimates associated with the effect. The parenthetical number indicates the parameter estimate before including the mediator. ***$p < .001$, †$p < .10$.

positively associated with forgiveness, $t = 3.02$, $p = .003$. No significant interactions with severity ($ps > .12$) or gender ($ps > .14$) emerged.

Examining only events that received an apology (86 apology events reported by 55 different participants), I next tested whether ratings of apology sincerity mediated the association between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness using a joint-significance method (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). This method assesses mediation by examining the statistical significance of the two relevant paths (independent variable to mediator; mediator to dependent variable, controlling for independent variable). As predicted, relationship satisfaction was positively associated with victims' evaluations of apology sincerity: parameter estimate = .72 ($SE = .18$), $t(43.38) = 3.91$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 2). Sincerity, in turn, was positively associated with degree of forgiveness controlling for relationship satisfaction: parameter estimate = .50 ($SE = .10$), $t(244.91) = 5.03$, $p < .001$. The association between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness went from being highly significant to marginal after statistically controlling for apology sincerity: parameter estimate = .42 ($SE = .23$), $t(51.95) = 1.85$, $p = .07$.

Relationship satisfaction did not significantly predict apology comprehensiveness: $t < 1$. Although apology comprehensiveness was positively associated with apology sincerity, parameter estimate = .70 ($SE = .27$), $t(159.16) = 2.59$, $p = .01$, relationship satisfaction remained a significant predictor of apology sincerity after statistically controlling for apology comprehensiveness: parameter estimate = .58 ($SE = .18$), $t(9.98) = 3.22$, $p = .009$. In addition, although apology comprehensiveness was positively associated with forgiveness, parameter estimate = .62 ($SE = .25$), $t(38.32) = 2.46$, $p = .02$, apology sincerity remained a significant predictor of forgiveness after statistically controlling for apology comprehensiveness: parameter estimate = .44 ($SE = .09$), $t(56.43) = 4.93$, $p < .001$. The association between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness was no longer significant after controlling for both apology sincerity and apology comprehensiveness: parameter estimate = .23 ($SE = .22$), $t(40.75) = 1.04$, $p = .30$. However, the association between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness remained significant after statistically controlling for only apology comprehensiveness: parameter estimate = .73 ($SE = .14$), $t(47.02) = 5.26$, $p < .001$. Apology

comprehensiveness thus did not mediate the association observed between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness.

Discussion

In the present study, I compared the influence of apologies on forgiveness when individuals were more versus less satisfied with their romantic relationships. Apologies were more strongly associated with forgiveness among victims who were highly satisfied with their relationships. In addition, relationship satisfaction was positively associated with victims' ratings of apology sincerity, which in turn predicted forgiveness. These associations could not be explained by relationship satisfaction differences in offense severity, offense type, or apology comprehensiveness.

The simple slope analyses revealed that relationship satisfaction was only associated with victims' forgiveness when an apology had been offered. When an apology was absent, individuals who were highly satisfied with their relationships were no more forgiving of their partners than individuals who were relatively less satisfied with their relationships. This finding suggests that, contrary to the conjecture that "love means never having to say you're sorry," transgressors reap no added benefit of their partner being highly satisfied with the relationship *unless* they apologize.

One of the more intriguing findings to emerge from this study is that perceptions of apology sincerity mediated the association between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness. This finding is consistent with past work demonstrating that individuals in higher quality relationships are more likely to perceive their partners' behavior in a positive light (Kearns & Fincham, 2005; McCullough et al., 1998; Murray & Holmes, 1993). Notably, the comprehensiveness of the apologies in the current study did not differ with relationship satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction remained a significant predictor of perceived apology sincerity when controlling for apology comprehensiveness. Apparently, the higher sincerity ratings among more satisfied individuals were not influenced as much by *what* was said as by how victims *interpreted* what was said. It is conceivable, however, that factors not assessed by the apology coding also influenced evaluations of sincerity, such as intonation, non-verbal behavior, post-apology behavior, and prior relationship history. Future research using experimental paradigms needs to be conducted to test more directly why individuals in less satisfied relationships regard their partners' apologies as less sincere.

The important role played by perceived apology sincerity in the current research suggests that, in general, this variable might be a key determinant of apology effectiveness. For example, past research demonstrated that apologies only increased forgiveness when victims perceived the offenses as being unintentional (Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008). It seems plausible that perceived apology sincerity might have been the mechanism behind this effect, such that apologies for unintentional offenses were judged as more sincere than apologies for intentional offenses. Although early apology theorists emphasized the importance of perceived apology sincerity (e.g., Goffman, 1962; Searle, 1976; Tavuchis, 1991), this variable is often omitted from research on apology effectiveness. The findings in the present study indicate that judgments of sincerity should be more heavily considered in apology process models.

One limitation of the current study is that participants were generally high in their relationship satisfaction. It would be interesting to examine how apologies function in highly dissatisfied couples. For example, individuals who are very low in relationship satisfaction might interpret an apology from their partner as highly insincere and possibly even manipulative. Apologies might thus be counter-productive for extremely dissatisfied couples, decreasing rather than increasing levels of forgiveness. Future research with a sample of highly dissatisfied couples is needed to investigate this research question.

A second limitation is the correlational design of the study. This design does not enable us to make definitive conclusions regarding the direction of causality between relationship satisfaction and responses to apologies. It is possible, for example, that individuals become more satisfied with their relationships following positive resolutions to conflict (i.e., the transgressor apologizes, the victim forgives). This reversed direction of influence likely also occurs, as the association between relationship satisfaction and responses to apologies is almost certainly bidirectional. Because relationship satisfaction was measured prior to the collection of diary entries, however, it is more likely that pre-existing feelings of satisfaction influenced assessments of apology sincerity and forgiveness in the present study. This direction of influence is consistent with past theorizing on the causal role played by relationship quality in predicting forgiveness (e.g., Allemand et al., 2007; Kearns & Fincham, 2005; McCullough et al., 1998).

An additional limitation of this study is that there was a delay between the time of the offense and the time that participants completed their entries in the evening. I included this delay because it would have been highly intrusive to have participants complete a diary entry immediately after an offense had occurred. Because of the delay, it is possible that participants' memories or evaluations of the offenses were altered by events that occurred between the time of the offense and the time of their entry. It is therefore unclear whether highly satisfied individuals perceived their partners' apologies as more sincere and were more forgiving of their partners immediately following the offenses, or whether their evaluations of sincerity and feelings of forgiveness increased throughout the day (alternatively, less satisfied individuals' evaluations of sincerity and feelings of forgiveness may have decreased throughout the day). Future work is needed to determine whether individuals who are relatively high versus low in relationship satisfaction respond differently to apologies *immediately*, or whether these different responses emerge as time passes and subsequent interactions occur. Nevertheless, the present study provides compelling evidence that, shortly after an offense has occurred, apologies are more effective at increasing forgiveness for individuals who are highly satisfied with their romantic relationship.

The current findings suggest that only highly satisfied couples reap the benefits of increased forgiveness following an apology. Past research has demonstrated that individuals who let go of interpersonal anger and forgive those who harm them reap psychological and physical health benefits, such as less psychological distress, greater life satisfaction, and greater perceived mental and physical health (Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001; Wilson, Milosevic, Carroll, Hart, & Hibbard, 2008). Physiological research has revealed that state and trait forgiveness are associated with lower blood pressure, lower heart rates, less stress, and fewer illness symptoms (Lawler et al.,

2005). In addition to these diverse benefits for the victim, forgiveness often marks the successful resolution of an interpersonal conflict, and ultimately promotes relationship well-being (Fincham, 2009; McCullough, 2008).

However, recent research by McNulty and colleagues (see McNulty, 2010, for a review) suggests that it might be adaptive for individuals in less satisfied relationships to make less positive attributions for, and be less forgiving of, their partners' negative behavior. Although benevolent attributions and forgiveness are both associated with increased psychological well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Toussaint et al., 2001), these "positive" processes can also be detrimental to relationships if they lead individuals to ignore the underlying problem and deter behavioral change. It is thus possible that individuals in both more versus less satisfied relationships are responding to apologies in ways that are most beneficial to their respective relationships. By being apprehensive about the sincerity of their partners' apology and withholding forgiveness, less satisfied individuals may be promoting long-term benefits, such as the confrontation and resolution of conflicts in their relationship. In contrast, because more satisfied individuals have fewer underlying problems, they can perhaps experience the benefits of these positive processes without exposing themselves to the risk of leaving important issues unaddressed. Future research should explore the relative advantages and disadvantages of positive responses to apologies for couples differing in relationship satisfaction.

Future research should also examine whether other aspects of relationship quality – such as relational commitment or closeness to one's partner – also predict responses to apologies. Because relationship satisfaction, commitment, and closeness have similar associations with forgiveness and are highly correlated with one another (e.g., Gagne & Lydon, 2003), it is likely that these variables also influence judgments of apology sincerity and, consequently, forgiveness following apologies.

Finally, future research should test whether the moderating influence of relationship quality on responses to apologies extends to other types of relationships, such as corporations and their consumers or governments and their constituents. For example, was Toyota's apology for the sticking pedal issue only effective for customers who previously held highly positive attitudes toward Toyota and its products? Was Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology for the Indian residential schools only effective for Native Canadians who previously felt highly trusting of their government? In light of the increasingly common occurrence of corporate and political apologies and the widespread belief in their transformative powers (Brooks, 1999; Lazare, 2004), it is important to understand whether these apologies are only effective for a subset of the intended recipients.

By bridging research on apologies and close relationships, the present study emphasizes the need to examine conflict resolution processes in the contexts in which they typically occur. The majority of transgressions transpire between individuals with a history of interactions and pre-existing feelings toward each other. The current work demonstrates that these feelings matter and therefore need to be included in models of the apology–forgiveness process. Further, the current work demonstrates that perceived apology sincerity is critical to understanding the link between relationship satisfaction and apology effectiveness. This finding highlights the need for judgments of apology sincerity to be included in future apology research. Finally, this research extends past

work in the area of relationships by demonstrating that individuals differing in their relationship satisfaction not only adopt different conflict management styles (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 1992), but also respond differently to conflict resolution strategies, such as apologies.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

1. There were no significant associations between relationship length and the presence of an apology, offense severity, apology sincerity, or forgiveness. Relationship length also did not interact with relationship satisfaction to predict any of these outcome variables.
2. Although participants also reported events from the transgressors' perspective, this paper focuses solely on victim events.
3. Logistic regression analyses yielded nearly identical results, $OR = .67$, $p = .02$.
4. Statistically controlling for the presence of acceptance of responsibility, forbearance, or hurtful comments did not significantly alter any of the results reported below.

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