

Apologies: Words of Magic? The Role of Verbal Components, Anger Reduction, and Offense Severity

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Across various disciplines apologies are discussed as an instrument of conflict transformation. Questions regarding “how” and “why” apologies contribute to resolving conflicts need to be illuminated further. These questions are addressed in two experimental vignette studies in Germany. Study 1 supports the idea that the inclusion of more verbal elements in an apology increases forgiveness, especially after a more severe offense. The study also reveals that the relationship between the completeness of apology and forgiveness is mediated by anger reduction. Study 2 demonstrates that for a more severe offense four elements of apology are particularly relevant, namely conveying emotions, admitting fault, a statement of apology such as “I apologize,” and an attempt at explanation. Implications for conflict transformation and further scholarly inquiries are discussed.

Keywords: apologies, accounts, offense severity, anger

“I apologize!” How often has one heard or spoken these words? In day-to-day life, reading the newspaper and watching the news, one comes across various reports of apologies after human misdemeanors. The situations in which apologies are given can be found in personal and public settings. Consequently, apologies are a topic of great interest, and their potential to change relationships makes them a particularly fascinating area of study. The act of offering an apology can be seen as

an interactive skill. This skill is the ability to handle a conflict and to restore relationships after a conflict situation (Alter, 1999; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Petrucci, 2002; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). An apology is often elucidated as a prelude to forgiveness and reconciliation (Müller-Fahrenholz, 2003, p. 173; Tavuchis, 1991, p. 22; Vines, 2007). Sometimes apologies are even described as constituting the heart of a reconciliatory process (Alter, 1999).

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The relationship between apology and forgiveness is also the subject of critical discussion. Academic literature challenges mainly the often anticipated deterministic relationship of apology and forgiveness—namely the assumption that an apology has to be followed by forgiveness—which can have negative consequences for the victimized (e.g., Allan, Allan, Kaminer, & Stein, 2006; Smith, 2008, pp. 132–139). Some might even refuse an apology in general because they do not believe in the benefits of an apology at all (Claes & Clifton, 1998). Nevertheless, it is more common that an apology from the harmdoer is of great importance to victims (De Cremer, Pillutla, & Folmer, 2011). Despite a strong desire for an apology, the recipient of the apology is often not satisfied with the spoken words (De Cremer et al., 2011; Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004), resulting in rejection of the apology. What, then, constitutes an acceptable apology? *How* and *why* can an apology be effective, accepted, and pave the way to forgiveness and even to reconciliation?

For a long while, apologies have been of interest to researchers in several scholarly disciplines and have been referred to as accounts (Meier, 1998). The classical definition of an account is given by Scott and Lyman (1968) who define an account as “a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior” (p. 46). Nevertheless, several typologies of accounts have been developed. Some include apologies as accounts (Schönbach, 1980), others do not (Schlenker, 1980; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Semin & Manstead, 1983; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981); and others explicitly separate apologies from accounts (Goffman, 1971; Tavuchis, 1991). Merging several account theories, Itoi, Obuchi, and Fukuno (1996) developed an account typology that differentiates among apologies, excuses, justifications, and denials.

Many scholars researching the effectiveness of apologies compared apologies with other accounts or no apology at all (e.g., Bennett & Earwaker, 1994; Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, & Dirks, 2007; Frantz & Bennis, 2005; Fukuno & Ohbuchi, 1998; Risen & Gilovich, 2007; Takaku, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2001). Questions in this context concern, for example, whether an apology is more effective than excuses or denials that follow a transgression (e.g., Fukuno &

Ohbuchi, 1998). This approach does not allow insights into the verbal composition of an apology nor the question of *how* an apology can be effective (cf. De Cremer & Schouten, 2008; Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). In the relevant literature we found only a handful of experimental studies that explicitly look at apologies in terms of their elements. However, these studies reveal that the success or failure of an apology depends on its composition (Anderson, Linden, & Habra, 2006; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Robbenolt, 2003, Study A; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Förster, & Montada, 2004).

The suggestions regarding the number and type of verbal components of an apology differ across researchers and disciplines (e.g., Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Harris, Grainger, & Mullany, 2006; Meier, 1998). Kirchhoff, Strack, and Jäger (2009) conducted a comprehensive literature review in the area of jurisprudential scholarship, sociolinguistics, sociology, theology, philosophy and psychology. They qualitatively analyzed 39 studies published between 1971 and 2008. Their examination of the various suggestions for elementary components of apologies identified 10 basic elements of apology as recurring in the literature. First of all, they identified statements such as “I apologize” as an illocutionary force-indicating device (IFID), a term introduced by Searle (1969) and coined by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (e.g., 1984). The IFID indicates that the phrase is meant to be a realization of an apology. Throughout this article we refer to the IFID as a “statement of apology (IFID).” Other components include the following: the naming of the offense (saying what one is apologizing for), taking responsibility, attempting to explain the offense (without an external attribution, because it would then be an excuse by definition; cf. Scott & Lyman, 1968), conveying emotions (such as shame and regret), addressing emotions and/or damage of the other, admitting fault, promising forbearance (saying that one will not repeat the offense), offering reparation, and a request for acceptance of the apology. This componential approach is unique in the sense that it extends beyond the common conceptualization of an apology as merely a sympathetic statement (Smith, 2008), but also integrates more objective and concrete aspects of a reconciliatory approach such as reparation (Auerbach, 2009).

Table 1 gives an overview of the verbal components introduced by Kirchhoff et al. (2009).

In addition, most of the research on apologies has focused on apologies after minor offenses (e.g., Fukuno & Ohbuchi, 1998; Risen & Gilovich, 2007) despite the fact that apologies seem to be especially desired after severe offenses (cf. Coicaud & Jönsson, 2008; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). It seems apparent that the question of what constitutes an acceptable apology is also relevant after severe transgressions. For example, Allan et al. (2006) found that after human rights violations people tend to forgive more easily if the perpetrator apologized with “true sorriness.” But what is “true sorriness”? How does the apology after severe harm have to be phrased to be perceived as an utterance of someone who is truly sorry? And do suggestions for the elementary composition of an apology suggested in the literature apply to offenses of varying severity?

Fehr and Gelfand (2010) searched for the underlying mechanism which would not only explain how apologies can be effective but also *why* this would be the case. They proposed that the correspondence between the apology’s composition and the self-concept of its receiver is highly relevant. The authors show, for example, that people with self-concepts that are highly focused on independence attach great importance to offers of reparation within an apology. We acknowledge that individual matches of personality and apology compositions can be

relevant, yet we propose that the search for an underlying mechanism other than stable trait-variables is worthwhile. We assume this because speech acts “contain a degree of consistency which is not purely individual but culturally and socially defined” (Harris et al., 2006, p. 720; cf. also Meier, 1998 and Scher & Darley, 1997). Hence, we want to scrutinize a state-variable for identifying a mechanism that could explain why an apology is effective. We propose that this mechanism might be grounded in the apology’s capacity to reduce the negative emotions elicited by the offense for which the apology is offered.

To date, research analyzing the relationship between apologies and negative emotions has focused on measuring the effectiveness of an apology by using, for example, anger reduction as an indicator (Anderson et al., 2006; Bennett & Earwaker, 1994; Hareli & Eisikovits, 2006; Schmitt et al., 2004). This has been done without simultaneously considering the apology’s effect on forgiveness or reconciliation. Such consideration would allow for testing of whether the reduction of anger mediates the relationship between the utterance of an apology and forgiveness. Nevertheless, studies show that the reduction of negative emotions can serve as a mediator between concepts such as ruminating over an offense as well as perspective taking and forgiveness (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007; Takaku, 2001). The calm-

Table 1
Elements of Apology Introduced by Kirchhoff, Strack, and Jäger (2009)

Elements of apology	Description
Statement of apology (IFID)	Using a phrase that states that the given statement is an apology, such as “I want to apologize.”
Naming the offence	Naming the offence(s) for which the apology is given.
Taking responsibility	Stating that one accepts responsibility for the offence(s).
Attempting to explain the offence	Trying to explain one’s behavior that led to the offence(s) without applying an external attribution.
Conveying emotions	Revealing emotions such as shame and remorse that one has committed the offence(s)
Addressing emotions and/or damage of the other	Addressing of emotions and/or damages that the offence(s) caused on behalf of the offended.
Admitting fault	Admitting that with the offence(s) one violated an explicitly or implicitly agreed-upon rule.
Promising forbearance	Saying that one wants to refrain from repeating the offence(s).
Offering reparation	Offering to account for harm and/or damages on behalf of the offended by monetary or symbolic restitution.
Acceptance request	Stating that one hopes, the apology can be accepted by its receiver.

ing of emotions may also explain the relationship between apologies and forgiveness.

In conclusion, questions on “how” and “why” apologies can contribute to resolving conflicts have to be further clarified (Blatz & Philpot, 2010; Meier, 1998). The two studies in this article directly address these questions. To address the how-question we want to analyze whether the inclusion of more verbal elements in an apology increases the likelihood that its receiver would forgive, particularly after more severe offenses. We also want to scrutinize “why” apologies can be effective by analyzing whether the reduction of anger can explain the relationship between the completeness of apology and forgiveness.

Study 1

Theory

Previous studies have revealed that apologies can enhance forgiveness (Allan et al., 2006; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Gunderson & Ferrari, 2008; Weiner et al., 1991). In the introduction we suggested that an apology can be highly desired but may not be accepted when it is offered. How can this be explained? Let us assume that one person is insulted in an offense. Two different apologies could be offered: one that includes more content and one that includes less. It can be expected that the more complete an apology is, the more effective it is. This is simply because the apology offers more information that the receiver wants to hear. Further, it can be assumed that the effectiveness of the apology can be explained by the fact that a more complete apology reduces more of the anger that the person holds toward the offender. Smith (2008, p. 29), for example, elaborates that it is not enough for a person to simply hear that someone is sorry; the person also wants to hear what the other is apologizing for. It can also be expected that these assumptions differ regarding offenses that vary in severity. After a minor offense, the person is very likely to perceive the apology as already complete when it includes less information. If you bump into someone on the street, for example, and offer him a lengthy apology, he would probably be very annoyed and vanish before you had even finished. Following more serious offenses, especially after very severe offenses, we assume that probably

only a complete apology would be more effective and increase the possibility of forgiveness.

It has been proven in prior studies that the composition of an apology indeed affects the perception and reaction of the offended in that a more elaborate apology is more effective (Anderson et al., 2006; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Robbennolt, 2003, Study A; Scher & Darley, 1997). However, none of these studies have scrutinized all 10 basic elements of apology identified by Kirchhoff et al. (2009, cf. Table 1). In addition, most experimental studies consider effects of apologies on reconciliatory behavior after offenses that are not very severe. Offenses include situations in which coffee has been spilled (Fukuno & Ohbuchi, 1998) or someone is talking on the phone while the other one wants to concentrate (Risen & Gilovich, 2007). That severity does have an influence on conflict behavior is supported by several authors (Smith, 2008, p. 11; Goffman, 1971, p. 116; Kuha, 2003; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Bennett and Earwaker (1994), for example, found in their study that higher offense severity is associated with a higher reluctance to forgive. In a theoretical analysis, Benoit (1995) also writes that accounts (such as apologies and excuses) after less severe offenses are more likely to be accepted. He continues by suggesting that the given account is acceptable when it “outweighs the offense” (p. 43). Similarly, Ohbuchi, Kameda, and Agarie (1989) suggest that, particularly after more severe offenses, more elaborate apologies may be needed. Thus, one of the leading interests of this article is to analyze the effectiveness of the apology’s completeness depending on offense severity.

Hypothesis 1.1: An apology that includes more of the 10 basic elements of an apology encourages more forgiveness, especially after a more severe offense, than an apology including fewer of these elements.

Concerning the hypothesis H1.1, it is assumed that the effectiveness of an apology primarily depends on the completeness of information conveyed. The present study also wants to identify a more complex mechanism that can explain the effect of apologies on forgiveness. We think that a good starting point is to look at the interrelationship of apology, forgiveness, and emotions. Scobie and Scobie (1998) review

several conceptions of forgiveness and conclude that forgiveness is commonly understood as a change in a negative emotional state, such as the reduction of anger, resentment, or anxiety. It can be shown that anger, in particular, correlates negatively with forgiveness (Tam et al., 2007). From their studies on emotional disclosure of offended toward offenders, Harber and Wenberg (2005) point out that forgiveness is a sequential process: reduced anger precedes forgiveness. The authors therefore promote interventions that facilitate the reduction of anger (such as writing an angry letter) after one has been offended. We assume that one of these interventions can be an apology on behalf of the offender. Previous studies have already supported the effect of apologies on anger-based emotions (Anderson et al., 2006; Bennett & Earwaker, 1994). Nevertheless, they have not simultaneously tested the effects of the apology on forgiveness. If an apology indeed reduces feelings of anger and this again enhances forgiveness, analyzing the reduction of anger-based emotions as a mediator between the completeness of an apology and the likelihood of forgiveness seems plausible. To the knowledge of the authors, this is the first study that analyzes this particular mediation.

Hypothesis 1.2: The influence of the apology's completeness on forgiveness is mediated by anger reduction.

Method

Design and procedure. Study 1 was designed as an online vignette study. Participants were welcomed and asked three demographic questions: age, gender, and educational background. Afterwards the severity manipulation (two levels) was introduced with a short description of a more or a less severe neighborhood conflict. The participants were asked to put themselves in the position of the offended person. On the next page the severity manipulation (one item) was tested. Next, the second independent measure, the completeness of the apology (five levels), was displayed. Thus, we used a 2 (severity of transgression) \times 5 (completeness of apology) between-subjects design. The program randomly assigned participants to one of the 10 conditions. After answering items on the tendency to forgive (five items), the

reduction of the anger-based emotions (two items) was rated. On the second to last page, the given apology was again displayed. The participants were asked to rate how much they felt each of the 10 elements of apology (10 items) was lacking and how important each of the elements is to them (10 items). The questionnaire ended with 14 items on religiousness and personal irreconcilability. A space was also offered for open comments on the questionnaire or apologies in general. All variables are explicitly described in the following sections.

Independent variables. The independent variable "offense severity" had two levels. In both scenarios the participant was asked to imagine living in a rental home. On her/his floor s/he has one direct neighbor. They have known each other for a year and so far everything has been fine. They always greet each other in a friendly manner. In the less severe condition, the participant was told that during the last week s/he had a small dispute with the neighbor. In the more severe condition, the dispute was an intense conflict, which had escalated. In both conditions, they were told that they met the neighbor by coincidence in the hallway and he, without any reason, complained about him/her having made too much noise lately. The less severe scenario stated that the neighbor affronted her/him in a dispute. While doing so, he also grabbed his or her arm. When asked, the neighbor let go. In the more severe scenario, the neighbor yelled and harshly affronted the person in a conflict. He aggressively grabbed his or her arm and pushed her/him. When asked to let go, the neighbor did not do so and grabbed even tighter. In both conditions, the scenario ended with the statement that because the incident s/he and the neighbor had been avoiding each other lately (cf. Appendix A). For the manipulation check, we asked the participants to rate "How severe did you perceive that what has happened to be?" on a five-point scale (with 5 being the most severe).

The manipulation of the independent variable "completeness of apology" was introduced with "Please imagine that the neighbor contacted you yesterday and said that he wanted to come over to talk to you. Because of this you invited the neighbor to come over today." The independent variable "completeness of apology" could be varied manifold as there are 10 core elements of apology. Of special interest was the combina-

tion of all 10 elements introduced by Kirchhoff et al. (2009, cf. Table 1) in comparison with combinations that were less complete. In addition to the complete apology, four further combinations were operationalized: One with a single element, another with four elements, and two with five elements.

Several authors define the statement of apology (IFID), such as “I apologize,” as an apology, despite its perfunctory character (cf. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Schlenker & Darby, 1981; Smith, 2008, p. 74; Vines, 2007). Therefore this element was tested singularly.

The four-element apology includes the statement of apology (IFID) and three further elements. One of these three elements was naming the offense, because otherwise the receiver does not know what the other is apologizing for (Lazare, 2004, p. 77; Smith, 2008, p. 28). Another was taking responsibility as this differentiates an apology from other accounts such as denials or excuses (Fukuno & Ohbuchi, 1998; Goffman, 1971, pp. 108–113; Tavuchis, 1991, pp. 17–19). The third element was an acceptance request as it has been shown in previous research to have an effect only if added to other elements (Schmitt et al., 2004).

To get a sense of the effect of adding one of the remaining six elements to an apology, two combinations of five elements were tested by adding one element to the four-element apology. These components were conveying emotions and admitting fault. Some authors refer to these two elements as having the most importance (e.g., Exline, Deshea, & Holeman, 2007). Also, these two elements have already been proven as equally important (Scher & Darley, 1997). The operationalization of the five apologies is displayed in Table 2.

Hypothesis H1.1 assumes that a more complete apology is more acceptable because it offers more information. Hence the effects on the receiver of the apology are expected to be the highest for the complete apology (10 elements) and lowest for the one-element apology—at least in the more severe condition. Similarly, the two five-element apologies are expected to be equally effective and more effective than the one- and the four-element apology but less effective than the complete one.

The manipulation check of the independent variable “completeness of apology” was more complex. To evaluate whether indeed the particular phrasing of the apology produces the

Table 2
*The Variation of the Independent Measure
“Completeness of Apology” in Study 1*

Name of element	Number of elements included in the apology				
	1	4	5	5	10
1. Statement of apology (IFID)	x	x	x	x	x
2. Naming offence		x	x	x	x
3. Taking responsibility		x	x	x	x
4. Attempt at explanation					x
5. Conveying emotions			x		x
6. Addressing emotions of the other					x
7. Admitting fault				x	x
8. Forbearance					x
9. Reparation offer					x
10. Acceptance request		x	x	x	x

Note. An “x” signals that the element is part of the apology. The complete apology, containing 10 elements, was phrased in the following way: “I want to apologize to you (1) that without any reason I complained to you and have been abusive to you (2). I am responsible for what happened (3). In the situation I lost control (4) and I am ashamed for what happened (5). I have recognized that I upset you (6). My behavior was definitely wrong (7). What happened will not happen again (8). If you want, I would like to make you an offer of reparation (9). I hope you can accept my apology (10).”

observable effect, it was important to compare the respondent’s subjective account of the content of the apology with the intended one. This is necessary because it is possible that the receiver of the apology may infer presence of components from the given apology that were not given explicitly (cf. Schmitt et al., 2004). In our study we therefore compared how much the participants considered the particular elements to be missing when they were part of the apology to when they were not. We did this to test whether they perceived each element as it was intended. The list of elementary components was introduced with “Can you rate how much you missed each of the following elements in the given apology?.” The participants rated each element on a five-point scale ranging from 1, *not missed*, at all to 5, *missed a lot*. When an element is rated as missing more often when it is not present compared with when it is present, we can conclude that the intended meaning corresponded with the subjective one.

Dependent measures. The effectiveness of the apologies depending on offense severity was evaluated by the likelihood to forgive. Five

items from previous studies were chosen for the forgiveness scale. The first two items concern whether the person forgives the offender – “I forgive the neighbor” (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Fukuno & Ohbuchi, 1998) but also if the apology is accepted – “I accept the apology.” The latter is important. Despite having forgiveness as its ultimate goal, the receiver of an apology can accept the apologetic utterance but is in no way required to forgive the offender (Allan et al., 2006; Byrne, 2004; Takaku et al., 2001; Weiner et al., 1991). Following Bolkan and Daly (2009), two items asked whether the apology was perceived as adequate as well as sincere – “I perceive the apology to be [adequate/sincere]” (cf. also Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Scher & Darley, 1997). That is reasonable because researchers emphasize that an apology has to be perceived as sincere to be accepted (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Schmitt et al., 2004; Takaku et al., 2001). The fifth item asked whether enough information was included in the apology – “The neighbor included everything in the apology that I wanted to hear from him.” All items used a five-point response scale ranging from *does not apply at all* to *totally applies*. See Table 3 for an overview on the items in the forgiveness scale. Concerning the potential mediator “anger reduction,” two items asked whether the apology reduced anger and rage – “Due to the apology my [anger/rage] has been reduced.”

Control variables. There are variables besides the direct effect of the speech act that influence people’s reaction in conflict such as reconciliatory behavior including forgiveness. Contextual variables, including the effects of culture (Alter, 1999; Takaku et al., 2001; Vines, 2007), relationship closeness between offender and offended (Dixon, Tredoux, Durrheim, &

Foster, 1994; Fukuno & Ohbuchi, 1998), the level of interaction that can be public or private (Griswold, 2007; Kampf, 2008) as well as interpersonal or between groups (Philpot & Hornsey, 2008), and the timing of apology (Frantz & Bennisson, 2005; Risen & Gilovich, 2007) were considered. These variables were kept constant, as the study was conducted with German-speaking participants (culture) and included a private, interpersonal conflict (level of interaction) with a neighbor (relationship closeness), who offers an apology one week after the offense (timing of apology). Other variables that might influence reconciliatory behavior are gender (Allan et al., 2006; Gunderson & Ferrari, 2008) and age (Mullet, Houdbine, Laumonier, & Girard, 1998), which were surveyed on the first page of the questionnaire. Further variables are religiosity (Barnes & Brown, 2010; Lawler-Row, 2010), general forgivingness (Brown, 2003), and irreconcilability such as trait revenge or trait avoidance (Allan et al., 2006; Schmitt et al., 2004). These latter variables were controlled for by items on the last page of the questionnaire, which are described in the next paragraph.

The single item measures on religiosity (“Are you a religious person?”) and general forgivingness (“Are you someone who can easily forgive”) were surveyed involving five-point ratings ranging from *does not apply at all* to *totally applies*. Personal irreconcilability was assessed by 12 items that differentiate trait avoidance (seven items) and trait revenge (five items) motivations drawing from the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM) by McCullough et al. (1998) in its German translation by Werner and Appel (2003). An example item for avoidance motivations is “If a person angered or hurt you, are you then a person who avoids that person?” An sample item from the measurement of revenge motivation is “If a person angered or hurt you are you then a person who will make that person pay?” (cf. Appendix B).

Importance of elements. On the last page of the questionnaire we asked the participants to rate each of the 10 elements of apology, which were displayed in a list. They were asked to rate how important each element of the apology is to them by again using a five-point scale (1, *not important at all*, to 5, *very important*).

Participants. Out of 240 people who participated in the survey, 192 had complete data

Table 3
Items of the Forgiveness Scale Used in Study 1 and Study 2

Item
I forgive the neighbor.
I accept the apology.
I perceive the apology to be adequate.
I perceive the apology to be sincere.
The neighbor included everything in the apology that I wanted to hear from him.

sets and were considered for the analyses. Based on statements suggesting misinterpretation of items in the open-comments section, two further participants were excluded from the sample ($n = 190$). The attrition rate did not differ between the 10 conditions according to a chi-square test that compared the number of dropouts with the number of participants who remained in the study across conditions, $\chi^2(9, 240) = 4.83; p = .85$.

The majority of participants had a high educational background (178 people at least had *Abitur*, which is equivalent to college admissions in the United States). The majority ($n = 154$) were females. On average people were 26 years old ($SD = 8.24$), ranging from 16 to 63 years. Because age (severity: $r = -.05, p = .50$; apology $r = .03, p = .73$), religiosity (severity: $r = .08, p = .31$; apology: $r = -.07, p = .36$), trait forgivingness (severity: $r = .02, p = .83$; apology: $r = -.01, p = .92$), and trait avoidance (severity: $r = -.02, p = .80$; apology: $r = -.01, p = .93$) did not correlate with the independent measures, they were dropped from further analyses. Gender (severity: $r = -.17, p = .02$; apology $r = .01, p = .85, n = 190$) and trait revenge (severity: $r = -.19, p = .01$; apology: $r = -.03, p = .67, n = 181$) did correlate with the independent measure severity and were therefore considered as a covariate in the analyses.

Results

The manipulation of both offense severity and completeness of apology was successful.

Participants rated the severity of the severe offense higher ($M_s = 4.41$, standard deviation $SD = .70$) than the less severe scenario ($M_s = 3.84, SD = .80$). This difference was significant, $t(188) = -5.18, p \leq .01$. The elements of apology were perceived as they were construed. Across all apology components, t -tests revealed that when an element was present in the displayed text, it was not as missed as when it was not part of the apology. This supports that the subjective accounts corresponded to the intended ones (cf. Table 4).

The forgiveness scale (cf. Table 3) used to evaluate the success of the different apologies showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .80). The two items measuring the reduction of anger after the utterance of the apology were also aggregated ($\alpha = .76$). The internal consistencies of the five items on revenge motivation ($\alpha = .82$) as well as the seven items on avoidance motivation ($\alpha = .86$) were high.

The first hypothesis H1.1 proposed that a more complete apology encourages more forgiveness, particularly if offense severity is high. As expected, no difference in effects on forgiveness were found for the two apologies containing five elements in both the less severe, $t(41) = -.79, p = .44, M_s = 4.15, M_s = 4.30$, and the more severe condition, $t(29) = .36, p = .72, M_s = 4.07, M_s = 3.97$. Hereinafter they were combined. An ANCOVA with gender and trait revenge as covariates partly supports the H1.1. Significant effects were found for both main effects (severity: $F(1, 171) = 4.20, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$; completeness of apology: $F(3,$

Table 4

Analysis of Subjective Apology Content (Study 1): Ratings for Each Element as Being Missed When Included Compared to When not Included in the Apology

Name of element	Not included Mean (SD)	Included Mean (SD)	t -test $t(df = 181)$
Statement of apology (IFID)	—	1.39 (1.00)	—
Naming offence	3.09 (1.48)	1.75 (1.18)	5.73***
Taking responsibility	3.00 (1.43)	1.28 (.83)	9.36***
Attempt at explanation	4.21 (1.20)	3.35 (1.60)	3.58***
Convey emotions	2.53 (1.40)	1.63 (1.09)	4.55***
Addressing emotions of other	2.46 (1.41)	1.62 (1.01)	3.41***
Admitting fault	2.29 (1.51)	1.43 (1.09)	4.22***
Forbearance	3.81 (1.35)	1.22 (.97)	11.03***
Reparation offer	2.72 (1.53)	1.19 (.52)	5.99
Acceptance request	2.26 (1.37)	1.26 (.69)	8.60

Note. When the element is significantly rated as being missed more when not included in the apology compared with when included in the apology, it can be inferred that the subjective content of the apology is similar to the objective one.

*** $p \leq .001$.

171) = 7.77, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .12$). For the interpretation of the effect size eta-squared (η^2) the standard conception of Cohen (1988) is applied throughout the study (.01 = small, .06 = medium, and .14 = large). The interaction of severity and completeness of apology, however, did not reach significance ($F(3, 171) = .62$, $p = .60$, $\eta^2 = .01$). The covariates also did not reach significance (gender: $F(1, 171) = .21$, $p = .65$, $\eta^2 < .01$; revenge: $F(1, 171) = .14$, $p = .71$, $\eta^2 < .01$). As Simmons, Nelson, and Simonsohn (2011) suggest, “(i)f an analysis includes a covariate, authors must report the statistical results of the analysis without the covariate” (p. 1363), we do so. The ANOVA, without taking into account the covariates, did not change the result. Both main effects hold (severity: $F(1, 182) = 5.46$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .03$; completeness of apology: $F(3, 182) = 8.28$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .12$), and the interaction of severity and completeness of apology did not reach significance ($F(3, 182) = .82$, $p = .64$, $\eta^2 = .01$). Hence we dropped the covariates from further analysis. The results of the ANOVA are depicted in Figure 1.

That the interaction of completeness of apology and severity was nonsignificant suggests that the effect of the elemental composition does not differ in the two severity conditions contradictory to the prediction of H1.1, which assumed that it is particularly important for the apology to be complete in the more severe condition. On the other hand,

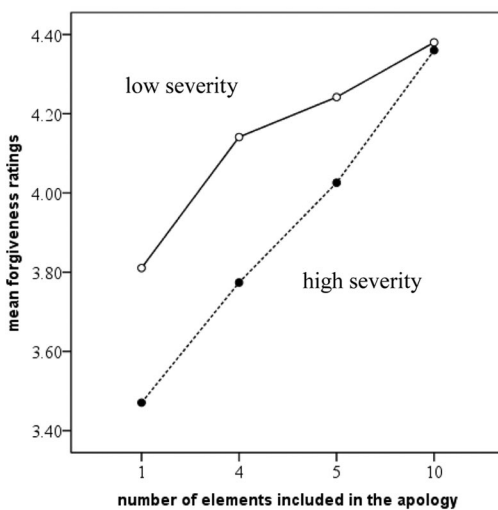


Figure 1. Mean forgiveness depending on composition of apology and offense severity in Study 1.

the pattern of means suggests that, for example, the difference between the five-element and the 10-element apology is greater in the more severe than in the less severe condition (cf. Table 5). Planned contrasts analysis included in the ANOVA further revealed that in line with the H1.1, in the less severe condition, for the comparison of more complete combinations with the next less complete one, only the difference between the one- and four-element apologies ($p = .10$) was marginally significant while the other two were not ($p_{45} = .56$, $p_{5c} = .39$). Regarding the high severity condition, the comparison between the one-element and the four-element apology ($p = .20$) and the one between the four-element and the five-element apology ($p = .21$) did not reach significance, whereas the comparison between the five-element and the complete apology ($p = .11$) was closer to reaching significance. This does not support H1.1 substantially, but slightly, as the completeness of apology in particular seems to have an effect in the more severe condition.

The second hypothesis H1.2 expected the effects of the completeness of apology on forgiveness to be mediated by anger reduction. Because the variable completeness of apology was categorical, it was contrast-coded for the mediation analysis (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2002, pp. 332–341; Eid, Gollwitzer, & Schmitt, 2010, pp. 651–654). The simple contrasts were designed so that the one-element apology was contrasted with the four-element apology (coding -1 and 1), the four-element with the five-element apology (coding -1 and 1) and the five-element with the 10-element apology (coding -1 and 1). In addition, we designed two further contrasts: one comparing the one-element and the 10-element apology (coding -1 and 1), which is called “extreme” contrast in the following, and the second one contrasting the one- and the four-element apology (coding each with -0.5) with the five- and 10-element apology (coding each with 0.5), which is called “less and more complete” contrast.

The bivariate correlations of the measures were suitable for mediation analysis only concerning the “extreme” and the “less and more complete” apology contrast in the more severe condition (cf. Table 6). For all other contrasts in the more severe condition as well as all contrasts in the less severe condition, the correlations did not allow for mediation analysis be-

Table 5
Means and Standard Deviations for Forgiveness in Study 1 Depending on Offence Severity and Completeness of Apology

Number of elements in apology	Less severe condition Mean (SD)	More severe condition Mean (SD)
1	3.81 (.69)	3.47 (.74)
4	4.14 (.58)	3.78 (.84)
5	4.24 (.60)	4.03 (.76)
10	4.38 (.51)	4.36 (.51)

cause either the completeness of apology did not affect anger reduction and/or the latter did not affect forgiveness (cf. Baron & Kenny, 1986). The mediation analyses with the two relevant contrasts in the more severe condition were computed with MPlus 6 (Muthen & Muthen, 2010).

At first, because of the high correlation of anger and forgiveness (cf. Table 6), we tested whether the two constructs could be separated. We did so by applying confirmatory factor analyses with MPlus 6 (Muthen & Muthen, 2010). The fit indices of the two- and the one-factor model are displayed in Table 7. The chi-square-difference is significant and supports considering anger reduction and forgiveness as two separate constructs rather than a single one ($\Delta\chi^2 = 10.07, df = 1, p = .01$).

Second, we ran mediation analyses. Results showed that in the severe condition for the

Table 6
Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations in the More Severe Condition for Variables Included in the Tested Mediation Model in Study 1

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. "Less and more complete" contrast	—	—	.29**	.33**
2. "Extreme" contrast	—	—	.22*	.37***
3. Anger reduction			—	.64***
4. Forgiveness				—
<i>M^a</i>	—	—	4.27	3.93
<i>SD</i>	—	—	.72	.78

Note. The independent variable completeness of apology was contrast coded. The "extreme" contrast compares the one-element and the 10-element apology. The "less and more complete" contrast compares the one- and four-element with the five- and 10-element apologies.

^a *n* = 91.

* *p* ≤ .05. ** *p* ≤ .01. *** *p* ≤ .001.

Table 7
Fit Indices for the Confirmatory Factor Analysis Testing Anger Reduction and Forgiveness in a One-Factor and a Two-Factor Model for the High Severity Condition in Study 1

Fit indices	One-factor model	Two-factor model
$\chi^2 (df), p$	42.17 (14), <i>p</i> ***	32.10 (13), <i>p</i> **
CFI	.89	.92
RMSEA	.15	.13
SRMR	.06	.05

Note. CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean squared residual.

** *p* ≤ .01. *** *p* ≤ .001.

"extreme contrast," the completeness of the apology had a positive effect on reducing anger ($\beta = .11, p \leq .04$) and anger reduction positively affected forgiveness ($\beta = .59, p \leq .001$). According to Christ and Schlüter (2012), anger reduction can be interpreted as a mediator in this sequence because the indirect effect, tested with confidence intervals by applying bias corrected bootstrapping, does not include zero. The values for the 95% CI lie within the range from .04 to .22. The same result occurred for the analysis including the "less and more complete" contrast in the more severe condition. Here the completeness of the apology significantly affected anger reduction ($\beta = .31, p \leq .001$), and the latter significantly affected forgiveness ($\beta = .60, p \leq .001$). The values for the 95% CI [.10, .27] did not include zero. Consequently, anger reduction can be interpreted as a mediator for the relationship between the apology's completeness and forgiveness when the apology's completeness is contrasted so that the less and the more complete apologies are compared. The path models of the mediation analysis are displayed in Figure 2a and 2b.

Information on the Importance of Elements

The importance ratings for each element did not significantly differ between the two severity conditions; hence, we calculated the importance ratings for the whole sample. The means for the importance ratings of the elements ranged from 2.16 (*SD* = 1.09) for the element, offering reparation, to 3.89 (*SD* = 1.33) for the element, showing emotions. All ratings are displayed in Table 8. Planned contrast analyses, which com-

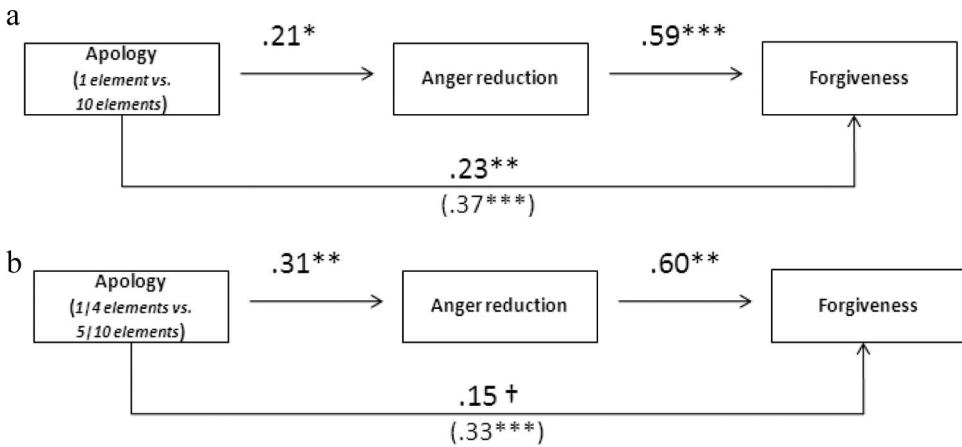


Figure 2. Results for testing anger reduction as a mediator between the relationship of apology and forgiveness after the more severe offense for the (a) “extreme” contrast and (b) the “less and more complete” contrast in Study 1. † $p \leq .10$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

pared each element’s importance to the importance of all other elements, revealed that the statement of apology (IFID) was rated significantly more important than all other elements together, $t(1820) = 3.49, p \leq .01$. The same applied for conveying emotions, $t(1820) = 5.36, p \leq .01$, the attempt of explanation, $t(1820) = 3.26, p \leq .01$, and the admission of fault, $t(1820) = 4.34, p \leq .01$. The offer of reparation, $t(1820) = -12.51, p \leq .01$ and the

acceptance request, $t(1820) = -5.05, p \leq .01$ were rated as significantly less important compared to the other elements.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 offer some support for the hypothesis that more complete apologies encourage more forgiveness than do less complete apologies. In the low severity condition, only the comparison of the effects of the one-element and the four-element apology on forgiveness is significant, suggesting that the more complete apologies do not differ in their effectiveness. In the high severity condition, the differences between the four-element and the five-element apology as well as the one between the five-element and the complete apology approach significance, offering some support for the idea that after more severe offenses, it is particularly important that the apology includes more elements. Looking at the two tested levels of severity, the difference between these two levels regarding the dependent variable, forgiveness, is not as large as one might have expected. This might stem from the fact that the two scenarios were both quite severe. In both scenarios, the participants were asked to view the situation from the perspective of a person who was yelled at and confronted with unwanted physical contact by an offender.

Table 8
 Comparison of the Importance Ratings of Each Element for Study 1 and 2

Name of element	Study 1 Mean (SD)	Study 2 Mean (SD)
Four most important elements		
Conveying emotions	3.89 (1.33)	4.33 (.82)
Admitting fault	3.79 (1.48)	4.43 (.75)
Statement of apology (IFID)	3.71 (1.55)	4.32 (.91)
Attempt at explanation	3.69 (1.31)	4.48 (.74)
Middle range		
Forbearance	3.52 (1.37)	3.93 (1.08)
Addressing emotions of other	3.44 (1.40)	4.09 (1.09)
Taking responsibility	3.32 (1.41)	4.16 (.91) ^a
Naming of the offence	3.32 (1.36)	4.09 (.97)
Two least important elements		
Acceptance request	2.89 (1.40)	3.39 (1.35)
Offering reparations	2.16 (1.09)	2.44 (1.21)

^a This element is on rank 5, but in contrast to Study 1 it was also rated as significantly more important than all other elements in Study 2.

Concerning the more severe scenario, anger reduction partly explains the relationship between the composition of apology and forgiveness when contrasting the least complete (one element) and most complete (10 elements) apology. The same applies when contrasting the less complete (one and four elements) with the more complete (five and 10 elements) apologies. Hence, the present study seems to support the idea that apologies contribute to forgiveness because they reduce anger, though this depends on the completeness of the apology. In line with this finding, studies related to the fields of research on apologies support the idea that the reduction of negative emotions can serve as a mediator between concepts, such as perspective taking and forgiveness (Takaku, 2001). Nevertheless, the results for the mediation analysis need to be interpreted cautiously because the emotion and the forgiveness items were asked at the same time. It is also possible that the apology affects forgiveness, and this in turn affects the reduction of emotional distress. Longitudinal data would be helpful to support these results.

As was revealed in this study, the 10 elements are not perceived as equally important, and some were rated as significantly less important than others. Does this mean that some of the elements are not important at all? To shed light on this question we conducted Study 2.

Study 2

Theory

Possible elements of apology are not of equal importance. As was revealed in Study 1, the expression of emotions, the admission of fault, the statement of apology (IFID), an attempt at explanation, and promising forbearance are rated as the five most important elements. The first four are rated as significantly more important compared with all other elements. Several researchers of apologies have argued similarly, contending that the statement of apology (IFID) and taking responsibility are elements that must accompany an apology, whereas others take a more context-specific stance (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Harris et al., 2006). There is, however, empirical support that, for example, the statement of apology (IFID), taking respon-

sibility, a promise of forbearance, and an offer of repair have approximately the same potential to enhance forgiveness and are therefore roughly of similar importance (Scher & Darley, 1997). Nevertheless, in another empirical test, Schmitt et al. (2004) supported the theoretical assumption of Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) that only some elements have to accompany an apology. Schmitt et al. (2004) demonstrated that the acceptance request only has an effect if added to other elements, but it is unclear whether the empirical argument of Schmitt et al. (2004) holds because their operationalization is not distinct enough; their approach does not clearly separate the statement of apology (IFID) from the acceptance request. For the latter, they use the phrase "I wish you could forgive me. I apologize for what I have done" (p. 469). In addition, none of the reported studies experimentally scrutinized all 10 basic elements of apology described by Kirchhoff et al. (2009, cf. Table 1).

To gain insights into the question of whether the elements of apology that are rated as less important actually have an effect if added to an apology, we conducted Study 2. It tested whether an apology composed of more of the 10 basic elements is more effective than an apology composed of fewer elements but includes those identified as more important in Study 1. The completeness of an apology is suggested to be particularly important after more severe offenses (Benoit, 1995, p. 43; Ohbuchi et al., 1989). Accordingly, Study 2 examined the introduced elements in the context of the more severe scenario operationalized in Study 1 (cf. Appendix A). As in Study 1, we propose that anger reduction might explain the relationship between the completeness of apology and forgiveness (Anderson et al., 2006; Bennett & Earwaker, 1994; Tam et al., 2007).

Hypothesis 2.1: After a more severe offense all 10 basic elements of an apology are more effective than apologies containing the five elements rated as most important, which is more effective than an apology containing the four elements rated as most important, which is more effective than an apology containing the one element rated as most important.

Hypothesis 2.2: The influence of the apology’s completeness on forgiveness is mediated by anger reduction.

Method

Study 2 was designed as an online vignette study, too. The structure of the study was similar to the one chosen for Study 1. The changes in the independent and the dependent measures are reported below.

Independent measures. For “offense severity,” variation was dropped and we only surveyed the more severe offense (Appendix A). The independent measure “completeness of apology” was manipulated in four steps in accordance with the ratings of the relative importance of each of the 10 elements in Study 1 (cf. Table 8). One apology contained only the element that was rated as the most important. The second and third apology encompassed the four and the five elements rated as most important. These are the conveyance of emotions, the admission of fault, the statement of apology (IFID), an attempt at explanation and promising forbearance. A fourth apology contained all 10 elements. These combinations are displayed in Table 9. The program randomly assigned participants to one of the four conditions.

Table 9
The Variation of the Independent Measure “Completeness of Apology” for Study 2 Based on the Importance Ratings for Each Element in Study 1

Name of element	Number of elements included in the apology			
	1	4	5	10
1. Statement of apology (IFID)		x	x	x
2. Naming offence				x
3. Taking on responsibility				x
4. Attempt at explanation		x	x	x
5. Conveying emotions	x	x	x	x
6. Addressing emotions of the other				x
7. Admitting fault		x	x	x
8. Forbearance			x	x
9. Reparation offer				x
10. Acceptance request				x

Note. An “x” signals that the element is part of the apology. The complete apology, containing 10 elements, was phrased as in Study 1 (cf. Table 2).

Dependent measure. The dependent measures were the same as in Study 1 with the exception that participants did not have to state how much they missed each element, because Study 1 had sufficiently shown that the intended wording of the elements corresponded with the subjective accounts of the elements.

Participants. Of 107 participants, 88 participants were included in the data set; the remaining 19 participants did not complete the relevant dependent measures. The attrition rate did not differ between the four conditions according to a chi-square test that compared the number of dropouts with the number of participants that stayed in the study across conditions ($\chi^2(3, 107) = 2.72; p = .44$). Most participants had a high educational background (71 had *Abitur*, which is equivalent to college admissions in the United States). The majority of participants were female (58 females, 26 males, 4 missing information). On average people were 32 years old ($SD = 13.15$), ranging from 19 to 72 years. Because age ($r = -.18, p = .09$), religiosity ($r = .04, p = .75$), general forgivingness ($r = .18, p = .14$), and trait avoidance ($r = -.08, p = .51$) did not correlate with the independent measure, they were excluded from the further analysis. Gender ($r = -.23, p = .04$) and trait revenge ($r = -.23, p = .06, n = 67$) correlated with the independent measure. Hence, these latter variables were considered as covariates in the following analysis. Because of the loss of cases on behalf of the variable trait revenge, we imputed the missing values by the mean of the sample.

Results

The forgiveness scale with the five items (cf. Table 3) was used to evaluate the success of the different apologies and showed good internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .87). The two items that measured anger reduction after the utterance of the apology were also aggregated ($\alpha = .84$). The internal consistency of the five items on revenge motivation ($\alpha = .84$) as well as the seven items on avoidance motivation ($\alpha = .77$) by McCullough et al. (1998; for the items see Appendix B) was high. Yet, a factor analysis of the 12 items on revenge and avoidance motivation revealed that the item “If a person angered or hurt you, are you then a person who lives as if that person doesn’t exist,

isn't around?" loaded low and on both factors (revenge: $r = .21$; avoidance: $r = .19$). Thus, we excluded this item from the original avoidance scale. This raised the Cronbach's alpha of that scale to .81.

Hypothesis H2.1 proposed that an apology composed of more of the 10 basic elements is still more effective than an apology composed of fewer elements, but those identified as more important in Study 1. An ANCOVA with gender and trait revenge as covariates revealed a significant effect for the independent measure completeness of apology ($F(3, 82) = 2.70, p = .05, \eta^2 = .09$). Both covariates did not reach significance (gender: $F(1, 82) = 1.08, p = .30, \eta^2 = .01$; revenge: $F(1, 82) = 2.47, p = .12, \eta^2 = .03$). The ANOVA, without taking into account the covariates, did not change the result. A significant effect was revealed for the independent measure completeness of apology ($F(3, 84) = 2.87, p = .04, \eta^2 = .09$). Hence, we dropped the covariates from further analyses. The results for the ANOVA are depicted in Figure 3. The pattern of means suggested differences in the effects of the completeness of

apology on forgiveness, particularly for the comparison between the one-element and the four-element apologies (cf. Table 10). Planned contrast analysis included in the ANOVA revealed that the comparison of each combination with the next less complete apology was significant regarding the comparison between the one-element and the four-element apology, $t(84) = 2.35, p = .02$, but not in the case of the other comparisons (4 vs. 5: $t(84) = .26, p = .80$, 5 vs. 10: $t(84) = -.62, p = .54$). The difference between the one-element and the complete apology was also significant ($t(84) = 2.05, p = .04$). Accordingly, H2.1 is partly supported.

With hypothesis H2.2 we wanted to test—as we did in Study 1—whether the relationship between the completeness of an apology and forgiveness is mediated by anger reduction. We applied the same contrast-coding of the variable completeness of apology as we did in Study 1. However, the bivariate correlations did not allow for scrutinizing anger reduction as a mediator because not a single one of the contrast-coded apology variables significantly affected

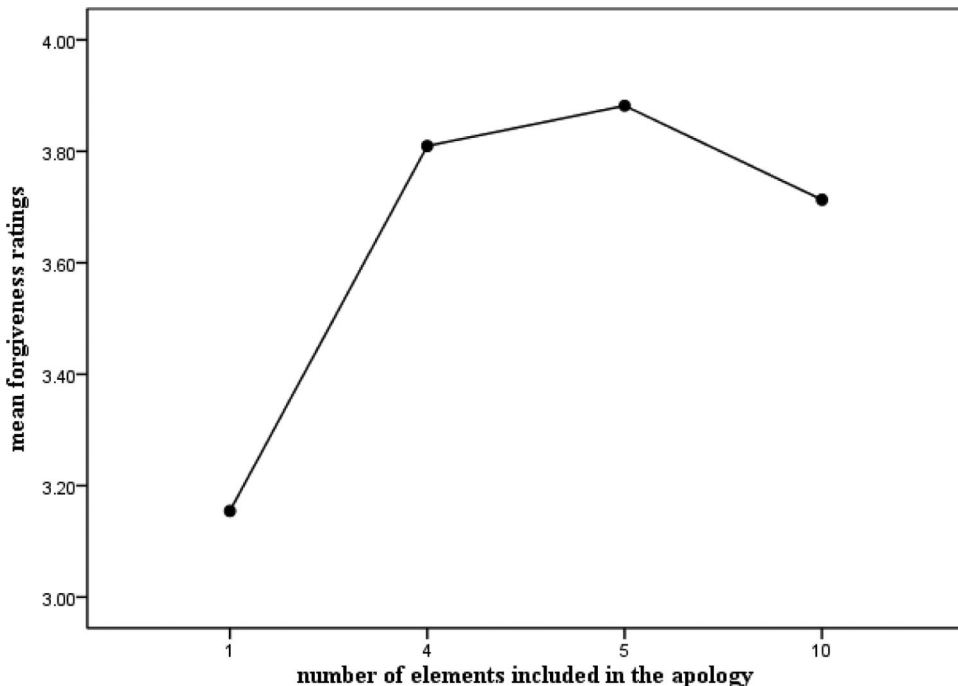


Figure 3. Mean forgiveness depending on the completeness of apology in Study 2.

Table 10
Means and Standard Deviations for Forgiveness in Study 2 Depending on the Completeness of Apology

Number of elements in apology	Forgiveness Mean (SD)
1	3.15 (.86)
4	3.80 (1.05)
5	3.88 (.98)
10	3.71 (.94)

anger reduction (Baron & Kenny, 1986, cf. Table 11).

The means of importance ratings for each element ranged from 2.44 ($SD = 1.21$) for the element offering reparation to 4.48 ($SD = .74$) for the element attempt at explanation. All results are displayed in Table 8. Planned contrast analysis comparing the importance of each element with the overall importance of the other elements, revealed, in line with the findings of Study 1, that the statement of apology (IFID) is significantly rated as more important than all the other elements, $t(676) = 3.05, p < .01$. The same is applicable to the conveyance of emotions, $t(676) = 3.15, p < .01$, the attempt of explanation, $t(676) = 4.59, p < .01$, and the admission of fault, $t(676) = 4.09, p < .01$. The elements offer of reparation, $t(676) = -13.31, p < .01$ and the acceptance request, $t(676) = -5.14, p < .01$, are rated as being significantly less important compared with the other elements. In contrast to Study 1, taking responsibility was also rated as significantly more important compared to all the other elements, $t(676) = 2.00, p = .05$.

Discussion

Study 2 compared apologies containing more of the 10 basic elements with an apology that contains fewer elements but included those identified in Study 1 as being more important. The apologies examined contained all 10 basic elements of an apology, the five- and the four-element apologies, and the one-element apology rated as most important in Study 1. We determined that the comparison between the one-element and the four-element apology reveals a significantly different effect of these two apologies on the tendency of their receiver to forgive, with the four-element apology resulting in higher forgiveness. The importance ratings of

the 10 elements were very similar to the ones in Study 1, with showing emotions, admission of fault, the statement of apology (IFID), and an attempt at explanation being the most important elements. The results can be interpreted as indicating that in the given context, the addition of the five verbal elements promising forbearance, addressing emotions of the other, taking responsibility, naming the offense, an acceptance request, and an offer of repair do not contribute much to the effects on forgiveness. The result concerning the element taking responsibility is surprising, because researchers advocate that it must accompany an apology (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Harris et al., 2006; Itoi et al., 1996). One possible explanation for these contradictory results is that, in the given context, people infer from the element admitting fault that the person is taking responsibility even though it is not explicitly stated. This does not suggest that in other contexts it is necessary to make this element explicit because admitting what happened was a mistake is not the same as explicitly saying that one was responsible for it.

Unlike the first study, Study 2 did not find anger reduction to be a mediator between the completeness of apology and forgiveness. The contrast coded apology variables did not have an effect on anger reduction. One possible explanation is that when the apology already includes the element that was rated as the most important, the other elements do not add much to the reduction of anger on behalf of the participant. Comparing the results of Study 2 with those of Study 1 strengthens this finding.

Table 11
Correlations for Anger Reduction and the Apology Contrasts in Study 2

Apology contrasts	Anger reduction
1. One- and four-element contrast	.09 ^{ns}
2. Four- and five-element contrast	-.07 ^{ns}
3. Five- and 10-element contrast	-.01 ^{ns}
4. "Less and more complete" contrast	.01 ^{ns}
5. "Extreme" contrast	.03 ^{ns}

Note. The independent variable completeness of apology was contrast coded. The "extreme" contrast compares the one-element and the 10-element apology. The "less and more complete" contrast compares the one- and four-element with the five- and 10-element apologies. ns = not significant.

In Study 1, the four most important elements conveying emotions, admitting fault, the statement of apology (IFID), and an attempt of explanation were only included in the five element apologies and the complete apology (cf. Table 2). The results of Study 1 revealed that anger reduction only mediated the relationship between the completeness of apology and forgiveness if the apology variable was contrasted for the one-element and the 10-element apology and the one- and four-elements versus the five- and 10-elements apology (cf. Figure 2). In comparison with the results of Study 2, it can be assumed that, in particular, the element conveying emotions (one-element apology in Study 2) reduces anger, because the four-element apology does not increase anger reduction. That the four-element apology in Study 2 still increases the forgiveness-likelihood compared with the one-element apology can be explained with the (in-)completeness of information that was offered.

General Discussion

Summary of Results

How can an apology contribute to forgiveness? Study 1 illuminated that, particularly after more severe offenses, it seems important for the apology to be more complete. This empirical finding is in line with theoretical assumptions by, for example, Benoit (1995), and has now received some experimental support for the first time.

Study 1 also revealed that some elements might be more important than others. In Study 2 we showed that one element might not be enough for apologizing, that for the given context—a neighborhood conflict—all elements might be too much, but four elements seem to be crucial. For the given context, these were the elements conveying emotions, admitting fault, the statement of apology (IFID), such as “I apologize,” and an attempt at explanation.

We also raised the question of how an apology can contribute to forgiveness. Study 1 supported that, at least after more severe offenses, anger reduction can—to some extent—explain the relationship between the utterance of an apology and forgiveness. However, in Study 2, anger reduction was not revealed as a mediator. One possible explanation may be that when the

apology already includes the element that was rated as being most important, the other elements do not add much to the reduction of anger for the receiver. Yet, a more complete apology still increases the likelihood of forgiveness. This can be explained with the content of the apology, which is perceived as more sufficient.

Shortcomings of the Studies

Some shortcomings of the conducted studies need to be stated explicitly. First, the basic methodological decision—against a qualitative study and in favor of a quantitative analysis—was definitely not an easy one. The authors were aware of the claim that “the best approach to collecting data about speech acts is the ethnographic approach—that is, the collection of spontaneous speech in natural settings” (Olshstein & Cohen, 1983, p. 24). This approach would produce data of high external validity allowing for a broad generalization of the results. However, we chose the quantitative experimental approach for reasons of internal validity. It allows a clear interpretation of the results, particularly with regard to the causal relation between the verbal content included in the apology and the likelihood to forgive. Because the identification of the causal relations was the primary aim of the study, the ethnographic approach was dismissed, accepting the reduction in external validity.

In comparison with real life settings, the format of the conducted studies did not allow for any interaction of the offender and the offended after the utterance of the apology that surpassed the acceptance or refusal of the apology. An apology can and should be dyadic, especially when it aims for forgiveness as well as for reconciliation in the long run (Alter, 1999; Goffman, 1971, p. 117; Hatch, 2006; Lazare, 2004, p. 66; Tavuchis, 1991, p. 46). That an interactive apology can have very positive effects indeed seems logical, because remaining concerns, especially on the part of the offended, can be directly addressed (Hatch, 2006). The online questionnaire also did not allow for an actual estimation of mimic, facial, or linguistic parameters such as tone and intonation of the expressions, which are particularly important for the evaluation of utterances and the conveyance of emotions (cf., Anderson et al., 2006; Dixon et al., 1994). Furthermore, interpersonal

research on apologies suggests that observers and direct receivers of apologies react differently toward spontaneous and coerced apologies. Whereas targets tend to accept apologies independent of their nature, observers do not (Weiner et al., 1991, Exp. 4). This could distort the results of vignette studies if the participants would have behaved more from the perspective of an observer or more from that of a target. Nevertheless, the latter only applies when the instructions to put themselves in the position of the offended are not followed correctly.

In line with critical comments on our studies, some general criticism that applies to the study of apologies should be mentioned. First of all, we do not want to suggest a distinct offender-offended-dichotomy, because in real life such a dichotomy is rarely found. Further, we want to address the concern that knowledge of the appropriate composition of an apology might be abused by an offender. This refers to the possibility that he or she wants to benefit from an apology in form of reduced punishment, for example, without actually accepting the blame or changing his or her attitude that is harmful to others (Allan et al., 2006; Byrne, 2004; Gill, 2000; Tavuchis, 1991, p. 7; Weiner et al., 1991). However, one is not obligated to forgive the offender after receiving an apology (Allan et al., 2006; Byrne, 2004; Takaku et al., 2001; Weiner et al., 1991). Moreover, apologies are recognized as an instrument that can benefit both the offender and the offended (Bibas & Bierschbach, 2004; Petrucci, 2002; Robbennolt, 2008). Bibas and Bierschbach (2004) emphasize that the process of apologizing and forgiveness “teaches moral lessons, brings catharsis, and reconciles and heals offenders, victims, and society” (p. 89).

Conclusion

The present study extends previous research on apologies in at least three ways. First, instead of testing the effects of apologies in general and independently from the question how it is composed, the effects of 10 different verbal components were tested in different combinations. Further, the research did not only focus on apologies after less severe but also more severe offenses. In addition, anger reduction as an underlying mechanism for the success of different compositions of apologies was examined. De-

spite the mentioned shortcomings of both studies, it is possible to consider the results in the framing of apologies in personal one-on-one settings. Such a setting might be a mediation, for example (e.g., Schneider, 2000). Studies suggest that in those settings and particularly after a relatively severe offense, an apology with richer content may be more acceptable. It can also be assumed that the reduction of anger plays a role for explaining the latter finding. The significance of the findings lies in the potential of apologies to be an instrument of conflict resolution (e.g., Alter, 1999; Tavuchis, 1991).

Of course, the generalization over the examined context has to be applied carefully. For one, the observed population was not a representative one. Further, the question remains whether the four elements we identified as being particularly important for the neighborhood conflict (including a statement of apology [IFID], conveying emotions, and admitting fault) would also be sufficient after offenses with extremely severe victimization. We suggest, in line with previous literature, only a complete apology is likely to be acceptable after such offenses (cf. Allan et al., 2006). It is, for example, assumed that in these contexts the element “offering reparations,” which in Study 1 and 2 is rated as significantly less important, is particularly crucial because otherwise the apology is perceived as insincere (e.g., Govier & Verwoerd, 2002). Of course the question of what constitutes an adequate reparation is a field of research by itself (Brooks, 1999, pp. 8–9; Byrne, 2004).

Further Research

The studies offer empirical results to the understudied field of research on the effects of the compositions of apologies. In particular, the effects of the verbal composition of apologies depend on relevant context variables, such as harm severity, still need to be explored in more depth. To question or support a set of basic elements of apology, such as those introduced by Kirchhoff et al. (2009, cf. Table 1), more studies need to be conducted. Further research on the composition of apologies also needs to test whether the examined set of basic elements also applies to political apologies. Previous research suggests that in the public setting, some elements, such as conveying emotions, might

not be very important (Lazare, 2004, p. 40; Tavuchis, 1991, p. 71). Especially for intergroup apologies, which commonly take place after extremely severe offenses, empirical research remains sparse (e.g., Blatz et al., 2010; Harris et al., 2006). Even though many have referred to the research on private interpersonal apologies to understand intergroup apologies, the relationship is not straightforward as these contexts are quite different (cf., Blatz et al., 2010; Philpot & Hornsey, 2008). We therefore call for further empirical research on the composition of apologies, not only in interpersonal, but also in intergroup settings.

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Appendix A

Manipulation for the Low and High Severity Condition as Introduced to the Participants

Low Severity	High Severity
Imagine that you lived in a rental home with several apartments. On your floor you have a direct neighbor.	Imagine that you lived in a rental home with several apartments. On your floor you have a direct neighbor.
You have known each other for one year and so far there have been no issues. You have always greeted each other friendly.	You have known each other for one year and so far there have been no issues. You have always greeted each other friendly.
However, with this neighbor you had a small dispute last week. When you met incidentally in the hallway, the neighbor complained that you have made too much noise lately.	However, with this neighbor you had an intense and escalated conflict last week. When you met incidentally in the hallway, the neighbor complained that you have made too much noise lately.
In this dispute the neighbor affronted you. Doing that he also grabbed your arm . When asked for, the neighbor let go .	In this dispute the neighbor yelled and meanly affronted you. Doing that he also harshly grabbed your arm and pushed you . When asked for, the neighbor did not let go and grabbed even tighter .
Since the incident you and the neighbor have avoided each other lately.	Since the incident you and the neighbor have avoided each other lately.

Note. The bold expressions are the ones that differ between the conditions.

(Appendices continue)

Appendix B**Items for Personal Irreconcilability Drawing From the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM) by McCullough et al. (1998)**

Items

If a person angered or hurt you, are you then a person who . . .

1. will make that person pay?
2. will keep the distance between you and that person as big as possible?
3. wishes that something bad would happen to that person?
4. lives as if that person doesn't exist, isn't around?
5. doesn't trust that person?
6. wants that person to get what s/he deserves?
7. finds it difficult to act warmly toward that person?
8. avoids that person?
9. is going to get even with that person?
10. cuts off the relationship with that person?
11. wants to see that person hurt and miserable?
12. withdraws from that person?

Note. Avoidance Motivation: items 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, and 12. Revenge Motivation: items 1, 3, 6, 9, and 11.