

Reactions to Admissions of Wrongdoing

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When people do wrong and then apologise for it, others may react by believing what the apologisee says (or not), forgiving them, thinking they were truly sorry and believing the apology helps the victim. In three scenario studies with a total of 1,669 respondents, we examined how ratings of the different reactions varied with the transgressor's profession, the nature of the victim and the perspective taken by the judge. These three factors all influenced reactions to the wrongdoing. In general, politicians were rated as being less believable, trustworthy, and less likely to be sorry than doctors; willingness to forgive decreased when the victim was junior; and respondents' attitudes towards the admission of an offence varied as a function of the specific perspective that they took. However, we also found that the different dimensions of the reactions varied differently with these factors and were not highly correlated.

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Introduction

How do people react when someone does something wrong and affects or harms other people and then publicly admits and apologises for the fault? Here we explored different aspects of reactions to the admissions: whether the admissions are believed, whether the transgressor should be forgiven, the transgressor's perceived motives for apologising, and whether admission helps the victim. In scenario studies, we varied the profession of the transgressor, the person harmed, and the perspective of the rating judge. The research focussed on the correlations between the different types of reaction and the ways in which the different reactions varied with the manipulated variables.

There is a very large amount of previous research on topics that relate to the present paper. In particular, there is a good deal of previous research on blame and appropriate punishments for transgressions (e.g. Darley & Pitman, 2003; Kemp & Chen, 2015; Sanderson et al., 2000), and a perhaps even greater body of research on forgiveness. (See Fehr et al., 2010, for a synthesis and meta-analysis of some of the forgiveness research.) A characteristic of this research is that the different research topics seem to have developed somewhat independently of one another, and, even within the different topics, there has not always been much integration. Fehr et al. (2010, p. 895) remark that "[t]he very interdisciplinary nature of forgiveness research, which has pushed the literature in many important directions and has led to a deluge of empirical data, has at the same time hampered paradigmatic synthesis."

Nonetheless there are common themes. For example, forgiveness is less likely and blame greater if more harm is done and if the harm is perceived as intentional (Darley & Pitman, 2003; Fincham et al., 2005; Kemp & Chen, 2015; Leunissen et al., 2013; Malle et al., 2007). Of more relevance to the present research, forgiveness is more likely and blame is reduced if an apology is made (e.g. Blatz et al., 2009; Corlett, 2006; Eaton & Struthers, 2006;

Exline et al., 2003; Fehr et al., 2010), and if respondents take the perspective of the transgressor (e.g., Exline et al., 2008; Takaku, 2001).

If there is a transgression an apology may or may not follow, and this apology may or may not lead to forgiveness or mitigation of blame and punishment. There are thus two questions: Will the transgressor apologise and how will the apology be received? The answers to these questions depend to some extent on the personalities involved (Brown, 2003; Graziano et al., 1996; Howell et al., 2011) and to some extent on the situation (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012; Fehr et al., 2010).

The two questions are linked. Whether or not the transgressor apologises depends to some extent on their perception of how the apology will be received (Schuman, 2018). According to Schuman, transgressors are less willing to apologize when they do not perceive apologies to lead to forgiveness. Consistent with this view, Leunissen et al. (2014) show that transgressors can commit forecasting errors when they contemplate apologies. In one experiment, the researchers asked some respondents to imagine making an apology while other respondents actually made an apology after both groups were led to believe that they had committed an offense. Compared to those in the latter group, those in the imagine group overestimated the aversiveness of making an apology while simultaneously underestimating the likelihood that the apology would be accepted or lead to forgiveness. These results show that misperceiving the effects of an apology can be one reason why transgressors are reluctant to apologize. They also raise the possibility that similar discrepancies in perception may exist between transgressors and victims, and these discrepancies can also contribute to transgressors' willingness to apologize.

Whether or not the victim or recipient of the apology forgives or reduces blame or punishment depends on their perception of the motivation of the transgressor for apologising (e.g. Corlett, 2006). Both the apologisee and the recipient of the apology try to infer the state of mind

of the other party, and these processes may bring the two parties closer together cognitively and emotionally, perhaps creating empathy in the process (e.g. McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997). However, Leunissen et al. (2013) cast doubt on the extent to which empathy occurs, and their research shows differences between victims and transgressors. Apologies serve to reduce anger in victims and guilt in transgressors. More strikingly, transgressors tend to apologise for unintentional transgressions, but victims want apologies following intentional transgressions.

In what follows we report three studies, all of which required participants to react to scenarios in which people apologized for wrongdoing. In all the studies, five different ratings were asked for. One of these – trust in the profession of the wrongdoer – can be viewed as a control variable. The other four were designed to measure different aspects of the reaction to the apology: the extent to which the wrongdoer was believed when making the apology; whether the wrongdoer should be forgiven; whether the wrongdoer was truly sorry when making the apology; and the extent to which the victim of the wrongdoing was helped by the apology.

At first sight it might appear that these four variables should be reacted to similarly, and that a respondent who, for example, favours forgiving the wrongdoer also believes the statement, believes the wrongdoer is truly sorry, and that the victim is helped. However, as the brief review of the research outlined above suggests, this may not necessarily be true. It could be, for example, that the factors which influence belief in the sincerity of the apology might not be the same as those that influence whether the transgressor should be forgiven. In particular, the findings of Leunissen et al. (2013) with respect to different views on what apologies are expected to accomplish indicate that high correlations between the four different dependent variables, although theoretically simpler, might not necessarily exist.

Relatedly it could be that different independent situational variables might affect the different dependent variables in different ways. In Studies 1 and 2 the transgression scenario was the sending of a sexually suggestive email. In Study 1 we varied the profession of the wrongdoer (either politician or doctor) and whether the emails were sent to someone of similar or lower professional standing (either colleague or intern). As doctors are considered to be more honest and ethical than politicians (e.g., Ipsos MORI, 2018), we expected doctors to receive higher ratings than politicians in terms of trust, the believability of the admission, and the intention of the apology. We also hypothesized a lower forgiveness rating when the transgressor was a politician than a doctor, and when the victim was an intern rather than a colleague. These predictions were consistent with previous research (Zheng et al., 2016), which has shown that figures with high power are less likely to be forgiven, indicating that forgiveness would be less likely if those harmed were of lower professional standing. We had no specific prediction whether the two factors would have an additive or interactive effect.

In Study 2, we further investigated whether reaction to an admission of wrongdoing would lead to intention to punish the transgressor, for example, by not going to an

event attended by the transgressor; and whether the decision would depend on the type of event. Because several factors can influence a person's decision (see Study 2 for more details), we had no a priori predictions about the results.

Finally, in Study 3, we examined the effects of perspective-taking and its possible interaction with the type of victim. Previous research has shown that in general respondents are more willing to forgive when they take on the transgressor's perspective (e.g., Exline et al., 2008; Takaku, 2001, Takaku et al., 2001). These studies typically used an elaborative way to induce a perspective such as by asking respondents to recall a past event in which they were the wrongdoers or to imagine how the transgressor in a scenario would think, feel, and behave. In Study 3, we used a very simple way to vary perspective. We told respondents, via a sentence in the description of the scenario, that they were the transgressor, one of the victims, or nothing was mentioned. Our goal was to find out whether different perspectives could be triggered with minimal mental effort, and if so, whether and how they would interact with different types of victims.

Study 1 METHODS

Participants

There were 750 (246 male; 504 female) respondents in total, all recruited from a first-year class in psychology. Ages varied from 18-24 (666 respondents) to 55-64 (3 respondents). The questionnaires were completed online (using E-Prime) during scheduled lab times.

Design and Procedure

A single scenario was used in a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subject design, with the principal manipulations being transgressor (politician vs. doctor), victim (colleague vs. intern), and ordering (the trust question being the 1st or 2nd question – see below). It read:

“After a male **politician/doctor** was caught sending sexually suggestive emails to a female **colleague/intern**, he made a public admission that what he did was wrong. He said that the emails were sent while he was drunk, and that he was sorry for his behaviour.”

The respondents answered five questions, each on a nine-point scale from 1 (definitely no) to 9 (definitely yes). The questions were:

- As a whole, can **politicians/doctors** be trusted? (Trust)
- Do you believe what the **politician/doctor** said in the above scenario? (Belief)
- Should the **politician/doctor** be forgiven? (Forgiveness)
- Do you think that the **politician/doctor** admitted the wrongdoing because he was truly sorry? (Sorry)
- Do you think the admission helped the **colleague/intern**? (Help)

Words in parentheses were not included in the questionnaire, but are used below in the description of the results. As indicated by bold type above, there was a 2 x 2 manipulation of the transgressor and the status of the

receiver of the email. Additionally, the ordering of the questions was manipulated. Approximately half the participants answering each scenario saw the belief question before the trust question ($N = 373$); and the other half saw these questions in reverse order ($N = 377$). As doctors are known to be perceived as more trustworthy than politicians, there is a possibility that responses to the trust question might differentially affect the ratings to the belief question, resulting in the doctor receiving a higher rating for Belief than the politician. Including the ordering of these two questions as a factor would allow us to tease apart the effect of transgressor from the priming effect due to order. The order for the rest of the three questions was randomly determined for each participant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the mean ratings for the five dependent variables collapsed across all the conditions and correlations between the ratings of these variables. In terms of correlations, noteworthy is that, although they are all positive and significant, they are not huge, and the higher correlations relate the two questions about the transgressor’s state of mind (i.e., whether the transgressor was truly sorry when making the apology) and the relationship between these inferences and forgiveness.

Table 2 shows the mean ratings for each dependent variables for each combination of transgressor and victim. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted on each

dependent variables using transgressor, victim, and the ordering as factors. To correct for multiple testing, we used Bonferroni correction, setting the significance level to .01 ($.05/5 = .01$). For transgressor, there were main effects on Trust (Doctor mean = 6.61, SD = 1.57; Politician mean = 4.77, SD = 1.65; $F(1, 742) = 243.67, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .25$), Belief (Doctor mean = 4.53, SD = 1.67; Politician mean = 4.10, SD = 1.68; $F(1, 742) = 12.39, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$), and Sorry (Doctor mean = 4.03, SD = 1.83; Politician mean = 3.31, SD = 1.80; $F(1, 742) = 29.23, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$), indicating that compared to politicians, doctors were perceived to be more trustworthy, their admission more believable, and their apology more genuine. For victim, there was a main effect on Help (Colleague mean = 4.60, SD = 2.17; Intern mean = 4.12, SD = 2.11; $F(1, 742) = 9.23, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .01$), indicating that the admission was deemed more helpful to a colleague than an intern. There were also several effects involving Forgiveness: the main effects of transgressor (Doctor mean = 5.11, SD = 1.77; Politician mean = 4.81, SD = 1.92; $F(1, 742) = 5.07, p = .025, \eta_p^2 = .01$) and victim (colleague mean = 5.12, SD = 1.74; Intern mean = 4.79, SD = 1.95; $F(1, 742) = 6.17, p = .013, \eta_p^2 = .01$), and their interaction ($F(1, 742) = 4.29, p = .039, \eta_p^2 = .01$). These results indicate a trend for respondents to be more forgiving when the transgressor was a doctor rather than a politician and when the victim was a colleague rather than an intern. Furthermore, the effect of the victim was larger for a politician (a difference of .61, $p = .007$) than for a doctor (a difference of .06, $p = .06$). No other effects were reliable.

Summarising the main features of the tables, note first that except perhaps with the Sorry variable, the average overall ratings were mostly near the middle of the scale and with quite large standard deviation, indicating a considerable degree of uncertainty. Consistent with previous research (Zheng et al., 2016) and with our hypotheses, colleagues were thought more likely to forgive than interns, and politicians were generally less believable, trustworthy, and less likely to be sorry than doctors. Note, however, the differences between politicians and doctors were not large, except with respect to Trust. Priming the respondents with Trust made no significant difference to these perceptions.

In addition to the above results, colleagues were thought more likely to be helped by the admission statement than interns. Although we did not make any a priori prediction about this, the finding is not surprising. Interns are typically young. As a society, we would like to consider it a moral duty to protect the young and the

Table 1. Overall ratings for the five dependent variables and Pearson correlation coefficients between these variables in Study 1.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Trust	5.69	1.85	--	.28	.24	.29	.11
2. Belief	4.31	1.69		--	.43	.48	.28
3. Forgiveness	4.96	1.85			--	.44	.29
4. Sorry	3.67	1.85				--	.32
5. Help	4.36	2.15					--

Note. $N = 750$. SD = standard deviation. All ratings on a scale from 1 (Definitely no) to 9 (Definitely yes), and all correlations significant at $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Table 2. Average ratings for the five dependent variables (DV) of Study 1 for the two transgressors and two victims.

Transgressor:	Politician		Doctor	
	Receiver: Colleague	Intern	Colleague	Intern
Trust	4.77	4.77	6.46	6.76
Belief	4.13	4.06	4.48	4.58
Forgiveness	5.11	4.50	5.14	5.08
Sorry	3.29	3.33	4.11	3.94
Help	4.50	4.19	4.69	4.05

Note. All ratings on a scale from 1 (Definitely no) to 9 (Definitely yes).

vulnerable, and a mere apology may not be considered very helpful.

Study 2

Study 2 was similar to Study 1. However, the sample was smaller. We also added a question regarding a social event with the transgressor. We examined whether the willingness to attend the social event would vary according to whether the transgressor was a politician or doctor and whether the social event was a public school fund raising party at a hotel or a private dinner party at home. We had no particular hypothesis as to whether the private or public event was more likely to be shunned. If the primary factor in the decision is the nature of the event, then the school fund raising party is more likely to be attended because it is a “good” event that contributes to the local community. However, if the deciding factor is the nature of the transgression, there should be no difference between the two events. In real life, it is also possible for the main concern to be the perception of others. In that case, people may not want to be seen socializing with a transgressor, and this would make them more reluctant to attend a public event compared to a private one. As our main interest in Study 2 was to explore respondents’ behavioural intentions as a function of the type of social events, we did not include victim as a factor.

METHODS

Participants

One hundred and sixty people (47 male and 113 female) took part. They were first-year psychology students, with an age distribution similar to Study 1. Ages varied from 18-24 (148 respondents) to 55-64 (1 respondent). As in Study 1, roughly half the participants answering each scenario saw the belief question before the trust question (N = 81); and the other half saw these questions in reverse order (N = 79).

Design and Procedure

A similar scenario to Study 1 was used, but in this case there was no manipulation of the victim:

“After a male **politician/doctor** was caught sending sexually suggestive emails to a female intern, he made a public admission that what he did was wrong. He said that the emails were sent while he was drunk, and that he was sorry for his behaviour.”

The dependent variables were identical to those used in Study 1 but one was added at the end. It read:

“Imagine that your parents are planning to have a **dinner party at home/a school fund raising party at a local hotel**. They had already invited the **politician/doctor** before the news about the scandal broke out, and they have decided not to un-invite him. You have also been invited to the party. Your parents are

now giving you a choice whether to attend the party or not. Are you going to attend?”

Note that this variable featured an independent variable of its own: the nature of the social event. Responses were on a scale from 1 (Definitely no) to 9 (Definitely yes).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tables 3A and 3B show the mean ratings for the first five dependent variables (i.e., the questions identical to those in Study 1) and the final event question, respectively. As in Study 1, we set the significance level to .01 for the first five dependent variables. A series of 2 x 2 ANOVAs, with transgressor (doctor vs. politician) and the ordering (Trust 1st vs. 2nd) as the factors. For transgressor, there were main effects on Trust (Doctor mean = 6.74, SD = 1.68; Politician mean = 4.83, SD = 1.62; $F(1, 156) = 53.0, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .25$) and Sorry (Doctor mean = 4.23, SD = 1.81; Politician mean = 3.41, SD = 1.73; $F(1, 156) = 8.41, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .05$), but not on Belief ($F(1, 156) = 3.02, p = .08, \eta_p^2 = .02$), Forgiveness ($F(1, 156) = 1.78, p = .18, \eta_p^2 = .01$), or Help ($F(1, 156) = 1.54, p = .22, \eta_p^2 = .01$), although the differences between the means in the latter three cases were in similar directions to those in Study 1. No other effects were reliable. When the difference in sample size is allowed for, the results of Study 2 are reasonable replications of those in Study 1.

For the event question, we performed a 2 x 2 x 2 ANOVA with transgressor, event type, and ordering as the three factors. Respondents were more willing to attend the hotel event (mean = 6.66, SD = 1.95) than the dinner party at home (mean = 5.64, SD = 2.46; $F(1, 152) = 9.13, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .06$). No reliable effect of transgressor was found ($F(1, 152) = 2.93, p = .089, \eta_p^2 = .02$), but there was

Table 3A. Average ratings for the first five dependent variables of Study 2 for the two transgressors and overall.

	Politician	Doctor	Overall
Trust	4.83	6.74	5.78 (1.91)
Belief	4.06	4.53	4.29 (1.73)
Forgiveness	4.69	5.09	4.89 (1.92)
Sorry	3.41	4.23	3.82 (1.81)
Help	4.15	4.55	4.35 (2.08)

Note. All ratings on a scale from 1 (Definitely no) to 9 (Definitely yes). Values in parentheses following the overall means are overall standard deviations.

Table 3B. Average ratings for the two transgressors, two events, and overall in Study 2.

Politician		Doctor		Overall
Fundraising	Dinner Party	Fundraising	Dinner Party	
6.38	5.32	6.93	5.98	6.14 (2.27)

Note. All ratings on a scale from 1 (Definitely no) to 9 (Definitely yes). The values in the parenthesis following the overall mean is the overall standard deviation.

a 3-way interaction of transgressor, event, and ordering ($F(1, 152) = 10.21, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .06$). To clarify the interaction, we conducted two separate 2 x 2 ANOVAs, one with politician and the other with doctor as the transgressor. For the politician condition, the only reliable result was the main effect of event ($F(1, 76) = 4.35, p = .040, \eta_p^2 = .05$). For the doctor condition, in addition to the main effect of event ($F(1, 76) = 4.86, p = .031, \eta_p^2 = .06$), event and ordering interacted ($F(1, 76) = 10.34, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .12$). Tukey's Honest Significant Difference test further revealed that the respondents in the Trust 1st group expressed less willingness to attend the dinner party (Trust 1st mean = 5.00, SD = 2.43) than those in the Trust 2nd group (Trust 2nd mean = 6.86, SD = 2.01; $p = .02$). No ordering effect was found when the event was the school fund raising (Trust 1st mean = 7.45, SD = 1.47; Trust 2nd mean = 6.40, SD = 2.09, $p = .36$). No other effects were reliable.

Note, firstly, that on average respondents were willing to consider attending the event rather than playing a role in ostracising the transgressor, although there was considerable individual variation in this. Secondly, the willingness to attend or ostracise was subtly dependent on the type of the social event. Compared to a private dinner party at home, respondents appeared to be more willing to attend a public school fund raising party in a hotel, perhaps because the latter could be perceived as an event with a good cause, and/or because there was a low probability of having to interact with the transgressor if one did not want to.

However, whether the transgressor was a politician or a doctor made no significant difference to the respondent's willingness to attend the social event with the transgressor. Nor was there an interaction ($F < 1$). Surprisingly, priming the respondents with Trust (i.e., the Trust 1st group) made them less willing to attend the dinner party and this effect occurred only when the transgressor was a doctor. We have no explanation for this finding.

Study 3

Study 1 found the different dependent variables to be moderately rather than strongly correlated, and, moreover, the different dependent variables were differently affected by the independent variables. Allowing for a smaller sample, these results were broadly true in Study 2. Study 3 examined whether comparable results might hold when the same dependent variables were used but a rather different scenario was employed, and whether the perception of the admission would be affected by the perspective/role of the respondents, and if so, whether the effects would interact with the type of victims.

Previous studies have shown that perspective-taking promotes conciliatory attitudes that lead to more willingness to forgive (e.g., Exline et al., 2008; Takaku, 2001; Takaku et al., 2001). However, perspective-taking is not always associated with willingness to forgive, and factors such as gender (e.g., Exline et al., 2008; Exline & Zell, 2009) and the type of measure (Welton et al., 2008) have been found to influence the relationship between the two. Unlike previous studies, in which different perspectives were induced by requiring respondents to

engage in extensive cognitive processing, we manipulated perspective-taking by simply telling the respondents that they were the wrongdoer (the transgressor), one of the victims (the victim), or not mentioning any specific role (the observer). If such a simple role-taking method is sufficient to cause a change in the respondents' responses to different dependent variables, we should expect those in the "transgressor" group to be more likely to express willingness to forgive and to perceive the admission as being due to remorse compared with those in the other two groups. Additionally, Study 3 also examined whether one specific type of forecasting error reported by Leunissen et al. (2014), i.e., the finding that respondents who imagined making an apology underestimated the helpfulness of the apology than the respondents who made an apology, could also exist between those taking the perspective of the transgressor and those taking the perspective of the victim.

METHODS

Participants

A total of 759 participants (233 of them male; 697 aged 18-24 years) completed the study. All were enrolled in an introductory psychology course (different intake to those in Studies 1 and 2) and completed the studies as part of a laboratory exercise.

Design and Procedure

Each participant read one scenario. The scenario varied the perspective the participant was asked to take - observer, transgressor, or victim - and the sufferers from the action - either workers or young children - in a 3 x 2 between-subjects design. We named the second factor "sufferers" so that the word "victim" could be used to refer to one of the perspectives. The scenario from the perspectives of the transgressor/victim in combination with the two types of sufferers read:

"A doctor had supported a public health measure in the media without researching it properly. This measure negatively affected a great number of people, especially **workers/young children**. You are **that doctor/one of the victims**. You/The doctor made a public admission that what you/he did was wrong. You/He said that you/he had a particularly busy schedule at the time, and that you/he were/was sorry for not spending sufficient time researching the issue."

The scenario from the perspective of the observer did not have the "(Y)ou were that doctor/one of the victims" sentence. Participants answered five questions on trust, belief, forgiveness, sorry, and help. The questions were answered on the same 9-point scales as in Study 1 and the wording was the same as the doctor condition of Study 1 except for changes to accommodate the differences in perspective and sufferers. For example, the sorry question for the transgressor perspective read: "Did you admit the wrongdoing because you were truly sorry for the harm you caused?"

The ordering of the questions was also similar to Study 1 except that every respondent started with the trust question, followed by the believe question. As there was no ordering effects in Study 1, ordering was not manipulated in Study 3.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4 shows the mean ratings for the five dependent variables collapsed across all the six conditions and correlations between the ratings of these variables. The tendency shown in Study 1 for moderate positive correlation was replicated here although generally at a slightly lower level. The average participant was usually undecided or very mildly positive in their reaction to the doctor’s admission, except for the Help question where the average participant thought the admission was somewhat unhelpful. However, the standard deviations indicate substantial differences between individuals in their reactions.

The mean results for each combination of experimental conditions are shown in Table 5, and a series of five 3 x 2 ANOVAs explored the impact of perspective and sufferer on the five dependent variables. We again set the significance level to .01. For Trust, there was no evidence that responses were affected by perspective, sufferer, or their interaction. For Belief, there was a main effect of perspective ($F(2, 753) = 9.60, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$). Tukey’s HSD test showed that the average rating was lower when the perspective was the transgressor (mean = 4.66, SD = 1.76) compared with the victim (mean = 5.14, SD = 1.85) or the observer (mean = 5.35, SD = 1.82), with no difference between the latter two. These results indicate that taking the perspective of the transgressor had a negative impact on the believability of the admission. For Forgiveness, there was a significant effect of sufferer ($F(1, 753) = 8.06, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .01$), suggesting that willingness to forgive decreased when the sufferers were children (mean = 5.16, SD = 2.03) rather than workers

(mean = 5.56, SD = 1.83). For Sorry, there was an effect of perspective ($F(2, 753) = 55.70, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .13$). Further analysis using Tukey’s HSD test indicated that the average rating was higher for those taking the perspective of the transgressor (mean = 6.98, SD = 2.08) than that of the victim (mean = 5.34, SD = 1.89) or the observer (mean = 5.40, SD = 6.50). There was no difference between the latter two groups. These results suggest that taking the perspective of the transgressor could lead to the apology being perceived as more likely to reflect remorse. For Help, a main effect of perspective was found ($F(2, 753) = 33.91, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$). Subsequent Tukey’s HSD showed a higher rating from the victim perspective (mean = 4.48, SD = 2.26) than from the transgressor (mean = 3.22, SD = 2.16) or the observer (mean = 3.13, SD = 1.91) perspective, indicating that the admission was perceived as being more helpful from those in the position of a victim than from those in the other positions. The effect of sufferer was also reliable ($F(1, 753) = 27.82, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$), suggesting that respondents deemed the statement more helpful for workers (mean = 4.00, SD = 2.24) than for children (mean = 3.21, SD = 2.09). In addition, perspective and sufferer interacted ($F(2, 753) = 6.62, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$). To clarify the interaction, we conducted three one-way ANOVAs, one for each perspective. For those taking the perspective of the transgressor or the observer, there was an effect of sufferer ($F(1, 250) = 32.75, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12$, for the transgressor; and $F(1, 252) = 10.81, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$, for the observer). In both cases, the average rating for workers was higher than that for children (For the transgressor perspective: Workers mean = 3.94, SD = 2.67; Children mean = 2.48, SD = 1.76. For the observer perspective: Workers mean = 3.52, SD = 2.00; Children mean = 2.75, SD = 1.74), indicating that the respondents considered the apology more helpful for workers than for children. In contrast, there was no evidence that those taking the perspective of the victim were influenced by the type of sufferer ($F(1, 251) < 1, ns$), as no reliable difference was found regardless of whether the sufferers were workers (mean = 4.54, SD = 2.33) or children (mean = 4.41, SD = 2.20).

From the analyses and Table 5 a number of results emerge. First, a reliable effect of perspective was found in several dependent variables, suggesting that merely asking respondents to take up a specific role can trigger changes in their attitudes towards the admission of an offence. On the one hand, compared with those who took the role of the victim or the observer, those who took the role of the transgressor were more likely to think that the admission was made out of remorse, a result consistent with the finding of previous research that taking the

Table 4. Overall ratings for the five dependent variables and Pearson correlation coefficients between these variables in Study 3.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Trust	6.53	1.39	--	.29	.19	.17	.12
2. Belief	5.05	1.83		--	.31	.30	.19
3. Forgiveness	5.36	1.94			--	.26	.31
4. Sorry	5.90	2.11				--	.14
5. Help	3.61	2.20					--

Note. N = 759. All ratings on a scale from 1 (Definitely no) to 9 (Definitely yes), and all correlations significant at $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Table 5. Average ratings for the five dependent variables of Study 3 for the three perspectives and two victims.

Perspective:	Observer		Transgressor		Victim	
	Workers	Children	Workers	Children	Workers	Children
Trust	6.56	6.63	6.71	6.30	6.59	6.39
Belief	5.43	5.27	4.65	4.67	4.96	5.32
Forgiveness	5.72	5.31	5.40	4.94	5.55	5.22
Sorry	5.49	5.31	7.06	6.89	5.17	5.51
Help	3.52	2.75	3.94	2.48	4.54	4.41

Note. All ratings on a scale from 1 (Definitely no) to 9 (Definitely yes).

perspective of a transgressor promotes conciliatory attitudes, which in turn can lead to more willingness to forgive (e.g., Exline et al., 2008; Takaku, 2001; Takaku et al., 2001). On the other hand, those taking the role of the transgressor thought that the admission was less likely to be believed and less helpful than those taking the role of the victim. These results extended the research of Lunissen et al. (2014), who showed that respondents made forecasting errors about the perceived helpfulness of their apology when they imagined making an apology compared with those who actually made an apology. In the present study, we show the existence of a similar forecasting error when responses from those taking the perspective of the transgressor were compared with the responses from those taking the perspective of a victim. Thus, people are neither very good at predicting the affective state of their own future self (Lunissen et al., 2014; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003) nor very good at predicting the affective state of their victims, and these misperceptions can contribute to transgressors' reluctance to apologize. It is worth noting that no reliable effects were found for Trust, which in any case calls for a decision about a profession not an individual.

Exline and colleagues (Exline et al., 2008; Exline & Zell, 2009) reported that gender modulated the relationship between perspective-taking and willingness to forgive in that the effect of perspective-taking was more pronounced in male respondents compared with female respondents. To check whether a similar relationship existed in our study, we included gender as a factor in a series of 2 x 3 x 2 ANOVAs. The only significant effect involving gender was for Trust, which showed a main effect ($F(1, 747) = 19.13, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$), indicating that male respondents trusted the doctor more (mean = 6.87, SD = 1.44) compared with female respondents (mean = 6.38, SD = 1.34). There was no indication that the effect of perspective-taking influenced willingness to forgive. The null results in our study are generally consistent with the result of a meta-analysis conducted by Fehr et al. (2010), which also found little evidence that gender influenced forgiveness.

Second, respondents' reactions varied with the type of sufferers. If the sufferers were young children then the doctor was less likely to be forgiven, and the sufferers less likely to be helped by the admission. Furthermore, how helpful the admission was perceived was a joint function of perspective and sufferer. Whereas those who took the role of the doctor or an observer considered the admission less helpful when the sufferers were children compared to workers, no such difference was found for those who took the role of the victim. Inspection of the ratings across the three groups that received "children as sufferer" scenarios (i.e., the transgressor-children, victim-children, and observer-children groups) further revealed that the interaction between perspective and sufferer was caused primarily by a higher rating in the victim-children group than in the other two groups. Thus, when respondents put themselves in the position of a victim, the type of sufferers no longer affected their ratings.

Comparison of the results of Studies 1 and 3 indicates that on average the sexually suggestive emails of Study 1 were rated less favourably on virtually every dimension than the health harm of Study 3. Comparing "like with

like", we find the average rating from the observer's perspective in the "doctor" scenario lower in Study 1 than in Study 3 for Belief ($F(1, 628) = 33.69, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .05$); Forgiveness ($F(1, 628) = 7.62, p = .006, \eta_p^2 = .01$), and for Sorry ($F(1, 628) = 80.59, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .11$). There was no difference for Trust ($F(1, 628) < 1, ns$), which serves here as a control for differences between the different samples.

The average rating for Help was also lower in Study 3 than in Study 1 ($F(1, 628) = 55.85, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$). Perhaps this was because the apology, regardless of its sincerity, could not do very much for physical damage that had already been done.

General Discussion

A number of general conclusions may be drawn from the three studies. The different dependent variables used in the studies were not strongly related to one another. This is shown by the correlations in Tables 1 and 4 which are small to moderate rather than large. For example, to forgive someone who admits their wrongdoing is not the same as finding the admission helpful, believing the admission, or thinking that the wrongdoer was really sorry.

The lack of strong correlations between the different dependent variables to some extent reflects the different dependencies that the variables had with the individual variables. In Study 1 whether a colleague or a junior was the recipient of the apology was seen as affecting forgiveness and the helpfulness of the apology. Similarly in Study 3, the nature of the sufferer influenced these variables. On the other hand in neither study was the nature of the recipient or sufferer important for determining whether the admission was believable or whether it was thought sincere. The results of the two studies are thus quite consistent with each other: They indicate that evaluating the effect of an admission of wrongdoing depends strongly on the particular measure used to determine its impact. As a kind of coda to this conclusion, Study 2 showed that people's willingness to ostracise a wrongdoer depended on the particular social event in question.

Some of the manipulations of the independent variables produced similar results to previous research. The lack of trust of politicians and the finding that their admissions were more cynically received reflect earlier findings from Zheng et al. (2016). Also in line with this previous research was our more general finding that harming more junior people or younger children was seen as less forgivable.

In addition to the above findings, the present research also extended prior research on the effect of perspective-taking. Lunissen et al. (2014) reported that respondents who imagined making an apology tended to underestimate the likelihood that the apology would be accepted or would lead to forgiveness compared with the respondents who made an apology. In Study 3, we found that relative to those in the role of the victim, those in the role of the transgressor gave a lower average rating for Belief and for Help. This pattern of data is largely consistent with Lunissen et al., indicating that taking the perspective of a transgressor could make one less likely to believe one's

own apology and its potential positive consequences to the victim.

This pattern of data is also consistent with an alternative interpretation, i.e., taking the perspective of a victim could make one more likely to believe the transgressor's apology. Because we included an observer perspective in our study, we can distinguish between these two accounts by comparing the patterns of responses among the three groups. Interestingly, responses from the observer perspective group did not always mirror those from the victim or the transgressor perspective group. For Belief, the average rating from the observer perspective group was comparable to that from the victim perspective group, and both were higher than the rating from the transgressor perspective group. In contrast, for Help, the ratings from the observer and the transgressor groups had no significant difference, and both were lower than the rating from the victim perspective group. If we consider the responses from the observer perspective group as a baseline, the above pattern of data suggests that while taking the perspective of a transgressor can lead to underestimation of the believability of an apology, it does not necessarily change the perceived helpfulness of the apology. Furthermore, relative to the other perspectives, taking the perspective of a victim can have a facilitatory effect in the perceived helpfulness of the apology, even though that perspective does not make the apology more believable.

In Study 3, the respondents in the transgressor perspective group gave a higher average rating for Sorry than those in the other groups, suggesting that taking the perspective of the transgressor can lead one to deem the admission of wrongdoing as being more genuine. Leunissen et al. (2013) pointed out that an apology serves different goals among transgressors and victims, with the goal being the reduction of guilt for transgressors but the reduction of anger for victims. Our finding suggests that in addition to different functions, an apology may also be perceived as reflecting different levels of remorse, with transgressors attributing more remorse than victims. It is also worth noting that all of the above results were found in a simple role-taking paradigm, suggesting that taking another person's perspective is likely to be a process that does not require extensive cognitive processing, and can be triggered with minimal effort.

Studies 1 and 2 used a scenario where someone sent sexually suggestive messages, Study 3 a scenario where the health of a number of people was negatively affected. Previous research (e.g. Fehr et al., 2010; Fincham et al., 2005; Kemp & Chen, 2015) suggests that people are less

likely to forgive and more likely to blame the wrongdoer when serious harm occurs. However, it is difficult to imagine that a sexually suggestive email could do more harm than a public health failure. There are a number of possible explanations for the direction of the difference we obtained - for example, even though the emails did less damage, their sending might be viewed as more mischievous than a professional mistake.

The research is subject to a number of limitations. Only two different scenarios were used. Although the samples used were large, they were restricted to university students. Like much but not all of the previous research in this area, all three studies employed scenarios, so it is unclear to what extent the results would apply in real life. A rather more subtle limitation is that of time. As remarked in the previous paragraph, we found the suggestive emails were less forgivable than the public health failure. However, all our studies were conducted in pre-Covid days, and it would not be surprising if this result now reversed.

There was a good deal of individual difference in the participants' reactions to the admissions. The average response on most of the variables in all studies could be reasonably described as uncertain, but the large standard deviations indicate that many individuals did have quite defined views but these were often in different directions. Previous research suggests that these individual differences in reactions are related to personality variables (e.g. Fehr et al., 2010) but we did not investigate those here.

In New Zealand as elsewhere it has become common for transgressors to apologise, and sincere apologies are thought to benefit victims. However, this expectation may need modification. A central finding in the present study is that different reactions to an admission of wrongdoing are not strongly correlated and that they seem to be affected by the different factors that in our studies were manipulations but that in real life would be different situational factors. This finding has implications. An apology that leads to forgiveness for the transgressor is not necessarily going to be helpful to the victim. An apology that helps the victim may not lead to the absolution that the transgressor seeks. The perception that the apology is not believable may not always matter. This paper does not set out many of the precise conditions when such disconnects might be expected, but it does show that they occur.

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