

2011

## An emerging theory of apology

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[10.1111/j.1742-9536.2011.00013.x](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2011/280)

This is the pre-peer reviewed version of the following article: Slocum, D. J., Allan, A. , & Allan, M. M. (2011). An emerging theory of apology. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 63(2), 83-92., which has been published in final form [here](#) This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

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# An Emerging Theory of Apology

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Number of words exclusive of references, tables and figures: 6541 words.

# An Emerging Theory of Apology

## Abstract

There is no consensus in the psychological literature regarding the operational definition of an apology, nor is there a comprehensive theory of apology. The object of this study was to use a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and grounded theory methodology to develop a theory of apology based on lay people's interpretation of apologetic responses. Data were methodically gathered by interviewing 23 people who had been wronged by an intimate partner. The analysis of the data suggests that there is not a single discrete definition of an apology, but that it is more appropriate to conceptualise apology as a process that consists of one or more of three components: affect, affirmation and action. Each of these components has two categories; one that reflects a self focus on the part of the wrongdoer and the other a self-other focus. What will be accepted as a *good enough* apology appears to depend on the severity of the consequences of the wrong, the level of responsibility attributed to the wrongdoer and the perceived wrongfulness of the behaviour.

Keywords: Apology

An Emerging Theory of Apology

Apology is a construct that has in recent years become prominent amongst the general public and scholars. Psychologists' interest in apology can be traced back to the work of Heider (1958) and it was initially studied by social and cognitive psychologists interested in remedial behaviour, that is, verbal acts that attempt to explain the wrongful behaviour so that it becomes acceptable (Cody & McLaughlin, 1987; McLaughlin, Cody, & O'Hair, 1983; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). Recently there has, however, been an increased interest in apology amongst other psychologists. For instance, as lawyers became more interested in the construct (Allan, 2008) psycho-legal researchers such as Robbennolt (2003; 2006) and Allan (2007; 2008) have started examining the construct in legal context. The biggest impetus, however, comes from clinical, counselling and health psychologists because there is evidence that apologies influence the reconciliation and forgiving processes (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Witvliet, Worthington, & Wade, 2002; Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero & Vas, 2004). Forgiveness as a therapeutic goal is relatively new (e.g., Pattison, 1965; Shontz & Rosenak, 1988), but since the mid 1960s evidence has emerged of a relationship between forgiveness and psychological (e.g., Coyle & Enright, 1997) and physiological (e.g., Witvliet, Worthington, Root, Sato, Ludwig, & Exline, 2008) benefits;

relationship wellbeing (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998) and possibly even physical health (e.g., Lawler et al., 2005). These findings have generated further research regarding what the best method is of promoting forgiveness (for a review, see, e.g., Baskin & Enright, 2004).

The role apology plays in the forgiving process is not clear, but it is neither a prerequisite for forgiveness (Allan, Allan, Kaminer, & Stein, 2006; Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998), nor a guarantee of forgiveness (Allan et al., 2006). There is evidence that apologies influence recipients at affective, cognitive and behavioural level. At the *cognitive level*, for example, Darby and Schlenker (1982) suggest that apologies mediate the attributions made by recipients about wrongdoers and that they therefore have more positive perceptions of the character of wrongdoers (see also, Gold & Weiner, 2000). Recipients of apologies are therefore more likely to believe that wrongdoers will refrain from repeating the wrong (Exline & Baumeister, 2000). The impact at the *affective level* is that apologies can help reduce the anger of those who had been wronged (Gold & Weiner, 2000) and assist them in developing empathy towards wrongdoers (McCullough et al., 1998). At the *behavioural level* the recipients of apologies are more likely to refrain from retaliatory behaviour and less likely to want to punish wrongdoers harshly (Gold & Weiner, 2000; Mullet & Girard, 1998).

Notable features of the psychological literature on apology are the lack of a comprehensive theory of apology, the failure of authors to

explicitly define the word and the absence of a generally accepted definition of apology amongst those who do provide a definition. For instance, Robbenholt (2003) distinguishes between a *partial apology* which refers to a statement that expresses sympathy, but does not admit responsibility and a *full apology* in which the wrongdoer both expresses sympathy and accepts responsibility.

The apology in Takaku, Weiner, and Ohbuchi's (2001) study reads:

*The copy machine on campus was not working. So, I went to an off-campus copy store. That took an hour. But, the copy machine there ate your notes and damaged them. I returned as soon as possible. I apologize. I am sorry. It is entirely my fault. I feel awful and terribly guilty; I must have caused you a lot of aggravation. I will do anything to make up for this* (p. 150).

This apology appears to conflate excuses and apologies, and the apology itself incorporates an admission of responsibility, but it is not clear for what, an expression of regret and a vague general offer of restitution (the last sentence).

Zechmeister et al. (2004, p. 542) say about their apology condition:

*experimenters simply apologised and stated that it was their fault that the participant had received negative feedback ('I'm*

*really sorry about giving you the wrong test, and I should have told [the senior researcher]. It is my fault that you got all that horrible feedback. I am really sorry I messed up.')*

Weiner, Graham, Peter, and Zmuidinas (1991) consider an apology to be part of a confession. They define confession as an “act ... [that] ... assumes both the acceptance of responsibility and personal blame. The acknowledgment of sin also may be accompanied by reparation (restitution)” (p. 283).

Not only do researchers use different definitions of apology, there are also internal inconsistencies in how they use the word within the articles they write. For instance, Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, and Dirks (2004) define an apology “as a statement that acknowledges both responsibility and regret for a trust violation” (p.105), however, when they describe the apology condition they say that “the candidate admitted responsibility for the trust violation, apologized for the infraction, and stated that such an incident will not happen again” (p. 108).

The common meaning given to the word apology in modern English is relatively new and this may explain some psychologists’ inconsistent use of the word in their own publications and the lack of consensus amongst psychologists in defining apology. The word apology derives from the Greek *apo* and *logos* to form *apologia* and its original, and still accepted

meaning, was that it was a formal, usually written defense, or rebuttal, of a position in the Greek legal system (Columbia Encyclopedia, 2008; Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, 1986; Oxford English Dictionary 1989). Plato's (Jowett, 1892) *Apology*, for instance, deals with Socrates' defense of himself at his trial before the Athenian leaders. This meaning of the word apology, which is still found in modern dictionaries (cf. the Oxford Dictionary, 1989), is so narrow and technical that it was probably never in common use. For example, a search of a digital copy of the English Standard version of the Bible, failed to find any occurrence of the word apology in it. The first documented use of the word apology in the sense that it is used today appeared in the English language towards the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Johnson (1755/1996) published the first edition of his *Dictionary of the English Language*. A sign that the word in this sense had probably entered common English by the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, is Shakespeare's (1591/1995) use of it in Act 3, Scene 7 of *Richard III*. Our review of the work of scholars from various disciplines suggests that the meaning of the word may still be evolving.

The sociologist Goffman (1971) defined an apology as a speech act that involves the:

*expression of embarrassment and chagrin; clarification that one knows what conduct had been expected and sympathizes with the application of negative sanction; verbal rejection,*



*repudiation, and disavowal of the wrong way of behaving along with vilification of the self that so behaved; espousal of the right way and an avowal henceforth to pursue that course; performance of penance and the volunteering of restitution* (p. 113).

Lazare (2004), who is a psychiatrist, defines an apology as “an acknowledgement of an offense together with an expression of remorse. It is an ongoing commitment by the offending party to change his or her behavior” (p. 263).

The philosopher Smith (2008), postulates that apologies do not have a finite meaning, instead he thinks “of them as presenting a loose constellation of interrelated meanings” (p. 140). A *categorical apology*, according to him, is “a rare and burdensome act” (p. 17) which achieves meaning across a number of elements. Apologisers must, namely, engage in a dialogue with recipients in the course of which they clearly identify the wrong they are apologising for and provide meaningful information about it in order to establish a shared factual record of the event. They must also accept moral responsibility for causing the wrong. The apologisers must further identify the specific harm or harms the recipients suffered, recognise the shared moral principles underlying each of these harms and confirm the value of the relevant principle in a manner that recognise the moral status of

the recipients. Apologisers must convey regret for their moral failure and commit not to repeat the wrong. Categorical apologies must also reveal that apologisers' intention for apologising is to demonstrate their commitment to the shared principles that have been violated by them. Categorical apologies must finally satisfy "some emotional expectation" (p. 106), but Smith concedes that he is not in a position to indicate what emotions apologisers should experience and when.

Taft (2000), a lawyer who emphasises the moral dimension of an apology, says that "if an apology is to be authentic, the offender must clearly admit his wrongdoing; he must truly repent if the apology is to be considered a moral act" (p. 1156).

Tavuchis (1991), a sociologist, says that an apology must incorporate "acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the violated rule, admission of fault and responsibility for its violation, and the expression of genuine regret and remorse for the harm done" (p. 3). He continues later to say that "whatever else is said or conveyed, an apology must express sorrow" (p. 36).

Given this range of definitions we agree with Smith (2008) who says that "we live in a transitional age for apologies" (p.1). Nevertheless, whilst the definitions of apologies put forward by these authors vary, they all suggest that an apology is a process that incorporates one or more elements. Common elements mentioned by authors are admissions of wrongdoing and

acceptance of responsibility for the offensive act (Lazare, 2004; Smith, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991) restitution (Lazare, 1995; Smith, 2008) and an expression of regret and sorrow (Lazare, 2004; Smith, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991). All these authors, even those like Lazare (2004), who focus on the pragmatic functions of apologies, recognise that apologies have a moral dimension.

It is also notable that these definitions are usually derived from scholarly thinking and debate. There is a dearth of research on how lay people define an apology. In one of the few studies with lay people, Sugimoto (1997) found that students who offered apologies for minor transgressions (i.e., damaging a friend's Walkman) in a laboratory setting incorporated expressions of regret and offers of restitution in their apologies.

This absence of a generally accepted theory and operational definition of apology makes it difficult to compare the results of existing studies and to do research in respect of apology. Ideally researchers should be guided by a theory and definition of apology that is grounded in the experience of lay people. The aim of this study, which is part of a more comprehensive project, was therefore to determine how lay people who had been wronged experience and interpret apologies they receive and to use this data to develop a theory of apology.

## Method

### *Design*

We used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Van Manen, 1990) to explore how lay people experience and interpret apologies offered to them. This approach is appropriate as it involves analysing data collected from participants to discern the meaning of an experience in order to construct an “evocative description of human actions, behaviours, intentions, and experiences, as we meet them in the real world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 19). The hermeneutic component involves interpretation whilst the phenomenological component involves the description of the phenomena being studied. The use of this approach allows researchers to develop a gestalt understanding of apology as conveyed by participants’ descriptions of the occurrence of this phenomenon in their natural environment.

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 23 Australian participants (10 males; 13 females), aged between 26 and 58 years from a cross section of educational and socio-economic backgrounds. All the participants had been in an intimate relationship for at least two years before the wrong took place and they rated the wrongfulness of the wrong, which had occurred within the previous two years, as extremely serious in that it violated an important relationship principle. Ten participants reported infidelity, seven reported

unsupportive conduct; and six reported domestic abuse by partners.

*Procedure*

Participants recruited through community networks were invited to take part in a study that explored conflict resolution between intimate partners and they were interviewed by the first author. The interviews, which were recorded, lasted approximately three hours and the interviewer used a semi structured interview format (see Table 1). In accordance with the phenomenological approach, participants were asked to describe their experience as completely as possible and were encouraged to elaborate and clarify these descriptions. Depending on the answers received the interviewer asked further open questions.

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Table 1 about here

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Following the grounded theory approach, the first three transcriptions were analyzed for thematic content, and interview questions were revised to explore the identified themes in greater detail.

*Data Analysis*

The analysis and development of the theory were guided by a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The first author analyzed each transcript to identify consistencies between participants'

descriptions so that general concepts could be collated into emergent categories, which possess properties and dimensions that define some aspect of the phenomena being studied.

This was done by first conducting a line-by-line analysis of each transcript to identify provisional themes, that is, repetitive patterns within participants' individual and collective descriptions. This data reduction phase enabled the identification of categories. Transcripts were then revisited for a secondary level analysis with the aim of delineating distinct properties and dimensions for these categories, and developing an integrated understanding of the phenomenon of apology by drawing relational connections between these categories. This categorization process produced sets of integrated concepts that were united by a central core theme. These concepts were used to form conclusions regarding the factors that constitute an apology.

To ensure methodological rigor the three authors met fortnightly to consider alternative interpretations of the data. A written summary was also given to participants to allow them to comment on the credibility of the initial interpretation, and their comments were considered during the final interpretation.

### Results and Interpretation

In describing what response they expected from wrongdoers, participants indicated that they believed that every apology is unique and

what will be a good enough apology will depend on the people and circumstances.

*Different things work for different people, so it's about what works for me, and that might be different to what works for someone else, but no one way is better than a different way of doing it... (Participant [P] 23).*

There was general agreement, however, that in the case of a serious wrong an apology is an arduous and time consuming process.

*For big things ... [it] ... takes time before you can trust someone enough again, that is if you ever can (P10).*

*A deep, deep sorry takes lots of words. It's not just 'I'm sorry'. Its lots of words (P17).*

An apology further requires a continuing dialogue and should preferably take place face-to-face.

*I have to have the person sit with me. ... If you have to face someone it's very different, it's an acknowledgement, it's a very hard thing to do (P4).*

*I would rather someone in my face, telling me, because it's more personal (P14).*

Participants did, nevertheless, concede that some people may find it easier to express themselves in writing and that a written apology could also testify of the commitment of the wrongdoer.

*If you have problems talking about your feelings you can get those feelings out, because you have to think about what you're going to write, so you have to think about the situation, and then think of the words to say it. Just taking the time and effort to write it tells you that they really want to do something about it all (P8).*

The participants indicated, however, that whilst the words are important, an apology is more than mere words.

*It's easy to say those words, anyone can say those words (P21).*

They were therefore looking for a more comprehensive response that covered “a whole suite of hearing and seeing. It's a full sense thing” (P10).

*The words confirm, that's what they do, they confirm. It's like a whole package, or baking a cake. The three work together to*



*make a cake because all the ingredients are there but the cake turns out just fine with flour and eggs because they're the most important ingredients. Words can be empty; they can be an apology, but aren't an apology. I thought I needed to hear the words, now I think I needed to see his sorrow and for him to have sorrow, to experience it for the right reasons; for him to truly understand the why of why I was hurt and hurting, and that he joined with me in my hurt, hurting for the same reasons, the loss, for what we have both lost, our marriage, our togetherness, a future as one (P2).*

Our analysis of the data reveals that participants believe that an appropriate apologetic response consists of one or more of three distinct components, namely: *affect*, *affirmation* and *action* (see Figure 1). Each of these components has two categories which reflect wrongdoers' focus on a continuum. At the one end of this *focus continuum* are those responses that show that wrongdoers focus on their own needs (*self-focused category*); and at the other end those responses which indicate that wrongdoers are also aware of the needs of wronged parties (*self-other focused category*).

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Figure 1 about here

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*Affect Component*

As described in the literature (see, e.g., Lazare, 2004; Pattison, 1965; Tavuchis, 1991) participants required an apology to include an affective component.

*Regret and remorse categories.*

Participants expected wrongdoers to show affect but distinguished between what we call regret (which focuses on the feelings of the wrongdoer) and remorse, which additionally incorporates a focus on the feelings of the wronged person. Participant 17 expressed the difference well by saying wronged people wanted “to know they [wrongdoers] were hurting and understood my hurt”.

Participants believed wrongdoers showed regret when they said they “wish they hadn’t done it” (P6) and that they “wish they could undo it” (P14). Regret therefore reflects wrongdoers’ unhappiness with the situation they find themselves in, and participants considered it to be self-focussed as it “is all about them” (P20), the wrongdoers.

*Regret is ... a self-focus thing, for you, for yourself (P6).*

Whilst participants thought that this personal distress and self focus was appropriate, they also require wrongdoers to demonstrate a self-other focus; they in particular wanted them to show that they had empathy with those they had wronged.

*It was very, very distressing to know that he wasn't joining me in my emotional needs (P3).*

Participants used a range of words, such as guilt, sorrow, shame and remorse, to describe this self-other focus, which we will refer to as remorse.

*To understand the hurt ... they ... had caused, before ... they ... could feel the guilt from hurting others (P3)*

*Have empathy and they're remorseful for what they've done and really deeply sad over it, but that is different to regret ... sorrow is about both of you, because they are feeling bad because they hurt you (P20).*

Participants indicated that wrongdoers had to be remorseful for the right reasons, that is, identify the shared principle that had been violated.

*He also has to understand enough to work out why it hurt me, so he has to understand the principle (P16).*

*He needed to be sorry for the betrayal, not the physical act of touching another woman but for what that act meant. He betrayed me, he betrayed my trust.*

*He needed to understand the why of why I was hurting. He needed to be sorry for the right reasons (P2).*

The theme of betrayed trust that comes up in the last excerpt is important as it refers to integrity-based trust, that is, people's perception that another adheres to a set of principles that they find acceptable (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). It appears as if participants measure the wrongfulness of behaviour with reference to the principle that was violated. Participants expected all people to obey social norms, and when it came to those they have relationships with, they further expected them to honour the shared relationship norms. It appears as if the perceived wrongfulness of the behaviour is a major determinant of what respondents expected of an apology. Other determinants appear to be the perceptions of those who had been wronged regarding the seriousness of the consequences of the wrong (Bennett & Earwaker, 1994) and the level of responsibility they attribute to the wrongdoer (Bennett & Earwaker, 1994).

An important feature of the affect component is that participants looked for observable signs of affect in wrongdoers' body language.

*Sorrow is in the voice, it's not what is said but how it is said. It's in the eyes and just how they look in general, crying, tearful maybe. ... Maybe the voice is shaky ... Maybe they look drawn and tired, ... the whole body sort of droops, like it's caving in on itself, like it knows it's in disgrace (P10).*

An implication of this non-verbal aspect of affect is that it may require face-to-face interaction between wrongdoers and wronged parties. It is, however, possible that the nature of the relationship between the parties may influence the importance recipients of apologies attach to non-verbal cues. People in close relationships who have been wronged may be more aware of non-verbal cues of wrongdoers and therefore better able to interpret them.

*Affirmation Component*

Participants did not necessarily consider affect in itself as an apology. In some situations “there’s no way that sorry is going to work on its own ...” (P22). This is because it is possible to “regret something and not feel responsible for it, or think it wrong. I can regret not going to the football” (P10). In addition to affect, participants expected wrongdoers to specifically identify the wrongful behaviour they are apologising for and to explicitly take responsibility for the wrongfulness and consequences of this behaviour.

*You have to admit the offense. What you did (P8).*

*[Saying I’m sorry] doesn’t tell you if they know why it was wrong or why it hurt you, you know, “I’m sorry I did it”, that doesn’t tell you about the principle, if they understand the principle. I think that’s probably more important than*

*anything, ... otherwise what are they sorry for? You have to know exactly what they're sorry for. Part of that's the acknowledgement that they know they've done wrong, but they have to be sorry for the right reason and show that they understand why it was wrong too (P10).*

*Admission of responsibility and acknowledgement categories.*

At the self focus end of the affirmation continuum participants wanted wrongdoers to admit responsibility and explain their behaviour.

*It means that she would be taking the responsibility for what happened. She would be admitting that it was her who had done wrong (P5).*

*Knowing the reasons just help to let the anger out more quickly, that's all ... without reasons it takes a lot longer (P12).*

Participants did not accept exculpatory explanations as apologies and appear to share the opinion of Tavuchis (1991) who says that “to apologize is to declare voluntarily that one has *no* excuse ..... when we resort to excuse ... [we] distance ourselves from our actions ... [and] deny or suspend the imperatives of responsibility and answerability” (pp. 17-19).

*He said he had work commitments. I felt like it was an excuse. He said he had to stay for work because there was something he had*

*organised that only he could do, but he didn't get that the something that only he could do was being there for me in my time of need (P03).*

*I got "I'm sorry. I can't remember doing it. It wasn't me, it was the drugs". ... he should have said "I'm sorry that my taking drugs ruined our relationship". That's what he should have said (P14).*

An explanation helped wronged parties to develop empathy with wrongdoers and develop less negative feelings about them.

*I could understand where she was coming from and maybe respect her a little more (P10).*

Researchers have found that understanding wrongdoers behaviour helps participants to develop empathy (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Gold & Weiner, 2000; McCullough et al., 1998) which is believed to be an important factor in assisting those who had been wronged to let go of their anger (Gold & Weiner, 2000). An explanation also helps resolve the ambiguity around incidents and can help bring closure to wronged parties because they feel it exonerates them from blame.

*I wanted to know it wasn't my fault (P10).*

*I wanted to know if I could have done anything to prevent it. It helped to take that onus off myself and helped me to deal with it* (P14).

This is a notable finding. Various authors have identified and examined self-forgiving in the context of wrongful behaviour, but they have often focussed explicitly on self-forgiveness by the wrongdoer (see, e.g., Bauer, Duffy, Fountain, Halling, Holzer, Jones, et al., 1992; Enright, 1996; Hall, & Fincham, 2005); or failed to state explicitly whether it was self-forgiveness by the wrongdoer or the person who had been wronged (Mauger, Perry, Freeman, Grove, McBride, & McKinney, 1992; Thompson, Snyder, Hoffman, Michael, Rasmussen, Billings, et al., 2005). This finding suggests that self-forgiveness by the wronged person needs to be investigated further as a variable of forgiveness.

Admissions of responsibility are, however, self focused behaviour, and participants, required self-other focussed behaviour to validate the consequences of the wrong and an “acknowledgment of the depth of my hurting” (P17). Recipients of apologies want apologisers to acknowledge “the ‘why’ of why I was hurt and hurting” (P2).



*You need to acknowledge that you have hurt someone, it's a moral obligation, so you have to acknowledge both to really understand what you've done (P8).*

*I needed him to admit responsibility and he did that, not just admitting but taking the responsibility and understanding why it was wrong and why it hurt me (P19).*

The participants' views appear to be consistent with Smith's (2008) observation that "not only do we want to understand what happened after a confusing or traumatic event, but we also want the offender to share our understanding" (p. 28).

#### *Action Component*

In addition to the affect and affirmation components, participants considered actions to be an important ingredient of an apology, because "by actions you can tell if someone is really sorry" (P6).

#### *Restitution and reparation categories.*

Some participants indicated that they wanted restitution in the form of compensation for their tangible losses to restore them to their rightful position. "If you are sorry, pay the damage ... You can't get to the

emotional repair unless you've repaired the damage" (P5). Participants indicated that they were prepared to "fight ... in the courts" (P2) to "get what ... [they are] ... entitled to" (P4) if it was not forthcoming. This finding echoes that of Zechmeister et al., (2004) who found that "a sincere apology [their apology consisted of an acceptance of responsibility and an expression of regret] required an additional step of 'making amends,' which subsequently make forgiveness more likely" (p. 555).

Restitution must be meaningful, in terms of indicating a genuine effort to address material loss related to the wrongdoing through offers of replacement or compensation by the wrongdoer. Participants were therefore ambivalent about gifts, such as flowers. Generally they considered gifts as "an insulting gesture ... a selfish thing. ...they're trying to win over instead of paying back" (P5) or "relieve their guilt" (P8) and gifts are therefore "not appropriate" (P4). Gifts were, however, considered appropriate if they demonstrated the sincerity of the wrongdoers.

*When a person knows what they've done is wrong and why it was wrong, and they bring you flowers to show they really mean what they say, then I think it adds to the words, it reinforces they're sorry when they say they're sorry, because they've felt bad enough to stop off and buy them, so it's a way of showing they want to fix things between you (P22).*

From the participants' perspective restitution, nevertheless, primarily constitutes self focused attempts by wrongdoers to deal with their own personal distress and or to re-establish their social standing by demonstrating responsible behaviour in terms of paying their dues. Participants, therefore, required self-other focussed reparation in addition to self focused restitution.

Wrongdoers' actions were considered to be self other focussed when they "repair the situation" (P9) by addressing both tangible and intangible consequences of the wrong in a manner that demonstrates that they understand the principle they have violated and the needs of the person, and that wish to repair the violated trust by "going out of their way to do something that might be an inconvenience for them"(P6).

*He started being supportive. ... It took a week of him phoning and dropping in and doing things like that to convince me he meant it. He had to show he meant it. So, he became attentive to my needs and I could see that he had become sorry enough and I could see that he meant it by all the things he did. The things he did were thoughtful; they weren't just quick fixes to get him out of the shit. It wasn't just him trying to be cute or smart. He had to go out of his way to do the things he did (P1).*

*I think it's more to do with investing time in finding what works for you, your partner caring enough to find out what's important to you, and then doing that (P23).*

As the last excerpt indicates reparation can take many forms, but a prominent form of reparation mentioned by participants was concrete action by wrongdoers to prevent a repetition of the wrongful behaviour. There must be “an indication that they will try to not hurt you like that again” (P8) and are actually taking steps “not to do it again” (P15). An important aspect of reparation is that it provides concrete evidence that wrongdoers seriously mean what they say. For instance, participant 2 commented: “If he had come to counseling with me I would have known he was genuinely making an effort ...”.

## Discussion

Based on the information provided by the participants it appears as if an apology does not have a fixed content and that what people who have been wronged require is not only individualistic, but also differs depending on the situation. These findings appear to be in accordance with the view expressed by Smith (2008), whose book was published after the collection and analysis of the data reported on here, that “the meaning of any apology derives from its particular actors and context” (p. 24). It appears to us that recipients expect an

apology to be *good enough* given the circumstances.

Whilst apologies can therefore differ according to the circumstances, they all appear to consist of one or more of *three components* (affect, affirmation and action), each with two categories that reflect the position of wrongdoers' apologetic response on a *focus continuum*. The categories at the end of these continuums are: regret and remorse for affect; admission and acknowledgment for affirmation; and restitution and reparation for action, with the first category of each pair representing an exclusive self-focus and the other a self-other focus (see Figure 1).

The affect and affirmation components are frequently mentioned by the authors' whose work we refer to in the introduction, but the action component has not been explicitly commented on by many other authors, and those who mention it do not appear to consider it of great importance. Lazare (1995), for instance, asserts that reparations and restitution may be necessary "when words are not enough" (p. 44), whilst Tavuchis (1991) believes that the acknowledgement and expression of regret serves as reparation and restitution. Our findings suggest that lay people usually do require some form of action beyond the mere uttering of words and confirms the finding of Zechmeister et al. (2004) who found that their participants required the making of amends to make forgiveness more likely.

The exact ingredients of a good enough apology are determined by several factors. We believe that the factors include those identified by

Bennett and Earwaker (1994), namely wronged parties' perception of the seriousness of the consequences of the wrong and the level of responsibility they attribute to the wrongdoer. Furthermore, based on the data of the current study, we believe that the perceived wrongfulness of the behaviour is also a determinant in that participants took into account the importance of the principle that was violated.

As the seriousness of consequences, the level of responsibility and wrongfulness of the behaviour increase, responses will have to be progressively more time-consuming (see also, Worthington et al., 2000); effortful, elaborate (i.e., have more components), self-other focused, and include both verbal and non verbal facets before recipients will accept them as apologetic responses.

For instance, where perceived wrongfulness, the severity of the consequences and the responsibility attributed to wrongdoers are low, a simple verbal *I am sorry* or a non-verbal gesture of regret (affect component) may be accepted as a sufficient apology. Failure to apologise, on the other hand, may aggravate the situation if the person who had been wronged feels that a principle has been violated and expect an apology.

Based on our analysis of the data of this study and the quantitative findings of Allan et al. (2006) we believe that a mere admission of responsibility (affirmation component) will seldom, if ever, be accepted as an apology; in fact it is likely to escalate the anger experienced by wronged parties (also see, Holtgraves, 1989; Weiner, 1995). Restitution (action component) on

its own is similarly unlikely to be accepted as an apology by wronged parties as they will construe it as either an attempt by wrongdoers to appease them, or to expunge their own feelings of guilt. It therefore appears that scholars such as Tavuchis (1991) may be correct when they argue that regret, that is, the expression of distress by wrongdoers about their wrongful behaviour, is an essential element of any apology. Affect, may, however, not be enough where there was tangible harm, because restitution is likely to be considered an essential part of an apology under these circumstances (see Zechmeister et al., 2004).

On the other hand, an effortful and elaborate apologetic response, that comprises all three components at the self-other end of the focus continuum, may be necessary when the perceived wrongfulness is high, even where the severity of the consequences and the perceived responsibility is low. A factor that may influence people's perception of the wrongfulness of behaviour is their prior relationship with the wrongdoer. For instance, where strangers assault other people the only norm they violated is a societal norm (i.e., do not injure others). An assault in a relationship, however, violates both a societal and a relationship norm (i.e., we do not harm each other) and this may increase the perception of wrongfulness. Behaviour that may not be considered to be very wrongful generally may be perceived to be very wrongful in a fiduciary relationship, that is, one that is built on trust between people.

It follows that where the perception of wrongfulness, the severity of the consequences and the responsibility attributed to wrongdoers are high, such as where there was marital infidelity, the response will definitely have to incorporate all three components at the self-other end of the focus continuum. Wrongdoers will have to show remorse by expressing and demonstrating to wronged parties that they know what principle they have violated and that they have empathy with their distress. They must further acknowledge the tangible and intangible consequences suffered by wronged parties as a consequence of their wrongful behaviour, especially that the trust in the relationship had been violated. They must, finally, undertake meaningful actions to repair the fractured trust in the relationship by addressing the consequent tangible and intangible needs of wronged parties. This will be a slow process (also see, Worthington et al., 2000) involving both verbal and non-verbal communication.

We believe this emerging theory of apology that is based on the lived experiences of people provides a plausible explanation of what recipients require of apologetic responses before they classify them as apologies. Other scholars have identified affirmation and affect (e.g., Lazare, 2004; Smith, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991) and action (Lazare, 1995; Smith, 2008), albeit using differing nomenclature, as components of an apology, but nobody has, to our knowledge, identified that the response within these components can vary from a self to a self-other focus. This distinction allows us to identify the constituting elements of an apology with more accuracy than other



scholars have been able to do. As such this theory can help researchers when they design experiments and allow authors to be more specific when they write about apology. For instance, analysing Robbennolt's (2003) experiment with reference to this theory makes it clear that what she did was to keep the restitution and regret categories constant, manipulate the admission category and measure her participants' willingness to settle a legal claim. Her finding, was that victims are more likely to settle a legal claim if they receive an apology consisting of regret, admission and restitution than when they receive an apology consisting of the regret and restitution components only. We believe that this terminology is much more specific than referring to a full and partial apology respectively. Using this theory the apology used by Kim et al. (2004) consisted of regret, admission and restitution categories. The apology used by Takaku et al. (2001) would, however, not meet our requirements of an apology in its current form for two reasons. Firstly, because the response includes an excuse, and secondly, because it is unclear what exactly the student is apologising for.

In conclusion, the theory is based on data collected from a specific group, namely participants who thought that the wrongfulness of their intimate partners was very serious in that it violated an important shared relationship principle. In grounded theory tradition the next step will be to extend the generalisability of this emerging theory by comparing the data it is based on with data collected from contrasting groups (Rennie, Phillips, & Quataro,

1988).

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We thank Dr Dianne McKillop and Dr Shirlee-ann Knight for their comments on previous drafts and the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on the submitted draft.

Table 1

*Examples of Questions Asked During Interview*

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- 1 Describe what it was your partner did that hurt you so much?
  - 2 What did your partner say or do to try and make amends?
  - 3 What could your partner have done?
  - 4 What would make you know that your partner was truly sorry?
  - 5 What is the most significant thing that would tell you your partner was truly sorry?
-



Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Possible components and categories of apologies.

# An Emerging Theory of Apology

