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Effect of Apology Focus on Perceptions of Sincerity, Apology Acceptance and Forgiveness

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Effect of Apology Focus on Perceptions of Sincerity,
Apology Acceptance and Forgiveness

Sophie M. Beesley

A report submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of
Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science,
Edith Cowan University.

Submitted (May, 2010)

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Effect of Apology Focus on Perceptions of Sincerity,
Apology Acceptance and Forgiveness

Abstract

The restorative justice process involves bringing the offender, their families, the victim and other stakeholders together, to discuss a particular offence and the impact on all those involved (Braithwaite, 2002). The intention of the restorative justice approach is to repair harm and restore relationships through forgiveness and reconciliation (Braithwaite, 2002). One way of achieving forgiveness is through an apology, and it is asserted by researchers that forgiving is significantly increased by an apology if the victim perceives that the apology is sincere, however, the indicators victims used to perceive the wrongdoer as truly sorry were unclear (Allan, Allan, Kaminer, & Stein, 2006; Slocum, 2006). The research conducted by Allan et al. (2006), therefore, highlighted the need to develop an operational definition of an apology, and further, to reveal what components of an apology were required for the victim to perceive sincerity. Slocum's (2006) theory of apology and the authentic apology (AA) model was subsequently developed and suggests victims are more likely to perceive an apology as sincere if it incorporates three core components (affirmation, affect and action) at the self-other end of a focus continuum. The aim of the current research was to use Slocum's (2006) theory in the context of restorative justice by comparing the impact of a self-focussed apology, where the offender is depicted as attempting to ease their own personal distress, to a self-other focussed apology, where the offender is depicted as attempting to address the needs of the victim, as well as their own. Sixty participants were asked to read a hypothetical scenario and apology, and complete a questionnaire. The quantitative data was analysed using chi-square analysis and the qualitative data used to further explore and interpret the findings. Results supported the hypotheses that when the core components of affect, affirmation and action in the apology have a self-other focus, participants would be more likely to perceive the offender's apology as sincere and would be more likely to accept the apology than when compared to an apology that contained only a self-focus. However, when the core components had a self-other focus, participants were not more likely to forgive the offender, and a tentative exploration of this finding was conducted. It was concluded nonetheless from the present study that the findings of Slocum (2006) are applicable to different contexts and to various offence situations, suggesting the generalisability of the AA theory in research. Further, the findings of the current study increased understanding of the role of the perception of sincerity in the acceptance of apology, specifically in the context of restorative justice, and facilitate a greater understanding of the impact of apology focus on victims. Therefore, the study has important implications for restorative justice, as mediators may be more successful in guiding offenders and victims towards outcomes that address the offence, as well as satisfy the needs of all parties involved.

Keywords: apology, focus, sincerity, acceptance, forgiveness

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Effect of Apology Focus on Perceptions of Sincerity,
Apology Acceptance and Forgiveness

Apologies are common utterances that are routinely offered in response to a transgression, misdeed or offence. A plethora of predicaments may result in harm being inflicted upon another individual, such as causing embarrassment, inconvenience, or psychological or physical damage. A frequent response is to apologise, with the intention to repair the harm caused. Apologising, like any social ritual, however must be taught and learned, usually during early developmental years (Tavuchis, 1991). The ritual involves a figure of authority informing the offender that a norm or rule has been violated and the offender is reprimanded. Then the authoritative figure instructs the offender on the mechanics of an acceptable apology. Finally, the offender complies with the request, whilst understanding the impact of their actions, acknowledging their accountability, and feeling remorse (Latif, 2001). The process becomes educational, as the offender learns how to remedy wrongful deeds (Latif, 2001). An effective apology therefore provides an important social function, with the apology ritual remaining a common feature of dispute resolution, ending conflict, restoring relationships and promoting forgiveness (Allan, Allan, Kaminer, & Stein, 2006; Latif, 2001).

Despite the common occurrence of apologies in everyday social situations, there remains little consensus about what exactly constitutes an apology (Allan & McKillop, 2010; Bruce, 2008; Sumner, 2006). Researchers have, however, suggested numerous common components of apology including expressions of regret, admission of responsibility or fault or damage, request for forgiveness, promise of forbearance or some offer of reparation, restitution or compensation, and/or a promise that the offence will not be repeated (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Petrucci, 2002; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schlenker & Darby, 1981; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Foster, & Montada, 2004). In addition, it has been acknowledged that people tend to use more complex apologies as harm severity increases, with apologies requiring a larger number of the above named components (Schlenker & Darby, 1981).

As suggested above, several researchers have identified components of an apology, however most analysis of apology effectiveness to date has involved situations in which a perpetrator either provides an apology or not. One example of this is when Risen and Gilovich (2007, p. 420) constructed the phrase, "I'm sorry, I really screwed that up for you", or alternatively, in the no apology condition, the offender simply sighed when reprimanded by an observer for the offence. Therefore, a definition of the most effective apology could not be found. Review of the existing literature did,

however, reveal the importance for victims to, at least, receive some form of apology. For example, Scher and Darley's (1997) findings indicated that the greatest improvement in victims' perceptions of offenders occurred when offenders apologised, even in the simplest form, compared to when victims received no apology at all.

Regardless of the lack of an operational definition, the strategy of apologising has been employed by community members throughout history to reconcile personal or collective transgressions. Leaders have received strong reactions from the general public over their decisions whether or not to apologise. For example, Prime Minister John Howard angered the Aboriginal people by refusing to apologise for Australia's past misdeeds; concerned that a formal apology regarding previous child protection policy resulting in the *stolen generation* could be construed as a deliberate wrongdoing and lead to extensive claims for compensation. On 11 December 2007 newly installed Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced that an apology would be made to Indigenous Australians, with the wording to be decided in consultation with Aboriginal leaders. On 13 February 2008 an apology was presented to indigenous Australians that acknowledged the harm caused, expressed sorrow for the harm, and attempted to repair the harm by addressing the victims' needs, including the statement, "For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry" (Australian Government, 2010).

A contemporary context of apologies that addresses interpersonal transgressions is restorative justice. The restorative justice process involves bringing together all stakeholders to participate in dialogue regarding the offence, the harm done, and how the issues raised can be addressed (Braithwaite, 2002). The aim is to promote healing and restore relationships between offenders and victims through forgiveness and reconciliation that ends conflict (Braithwaite, 2002). Reconciliation occurs when victims and offenders mutually condemn the criminal act, whilst retaining respect for one another and their value; simultaneously removing the offender's deviant status (Lawson & Katz, 2004). The justice procedure is therefore humanised by allowing victims the opportunity to confront offenders to gain answers to questions, to express their feelings, and for offenders and victims to negotiate a mutually acceptable outcome (Umbreit, 1994). The restorative justice approach views crime as a violation of interpersonal relationships and places primary responsibility on offenders to put things right (Choi & Severson, 2009; Umbreit, 1994). One way this is achieved is by offering an apology.

Victims often desire an apology after experiencing a harmful act, however, not all offenders apologise (Petrucci, 2002). It is suggested that if offenders realise the harm they have caused and understand that they are responsible, they will be motivated to apologise (Petrucci, 2002). Offenders' decisions regarding whether or not to provide an apology to their victim have been linked to later outcomes (Petrucci, 2002). A chance finding by Morris and Maxwell (1997) revealed that juvenile offenders who did not apologise during the process of a family group conference were three times more likely to re-offend than their apologising counterparts. Given that the apology was not a focus of the Morris and Maxwell (1997) study, the reason why some individuals failed to apologise can only be speculated on and the following explanations are offered: that the young person did not have empathy for the victim and as a result were not sorry for the harm they caused or, alternatively, the young person lacked the skills to either identify that an apology would be appropriate and/or how to construct and deliver an apology. People can apologise sincerely in mediation; however, some individuals require assistance (Schneider, 2000). Individuals often need preparation before they are ready to offer an apology and they may need additional help with the words (Schneider, 2000). It appears imperative, therefore, to give offenders the opportunity and guidance to apologise, which can only be offered by better understanding apologies.

Firstly, in this thesis, there will be a review of the literature on apology in terms of the role of apology in repairing harm and restoring relationships, to illustrate the benefits of apology. Then, in the context of criminal justice, victims' decisions to reject an apology will be discussed, to highlight the possible implications of failed apologies, and to demonstrate why it is imperative for offenders to provide an effective apology. Further, the literature relating to victims' decisions to accept an apology will be reviewed, to reveal possible influences on decision-making. Then, the literature regarding perceived sincerity of apologies will be discussed, revealing what is known about victims' perceptions of sincerity and apology acceptance. In addition, the authentic apology model will be explained, given the use of the model in the current study. As apology constitutes an important component of the restorative justice procedure, which is most frequently applied with juveniles, a review of the literature regarding apology in the juvenile justice setting will be provided. Finally, the present study and rationale will be outlined.

Apology: Repair of Harm and Restoration of Relationships

From a psychological standpoint, apologies are of great benefit to offended individuals (Maxwell & Morris, 1996). An offender's offer of an apology gives victims

the opportunity to release negative feelings about the offender and the offence (Maxwell & Morris, 1996). Additional benefits are provided to the victim by giving them the opportunity to be heard, and providing them with insight into why the offence occurred. Such benefits are of particular interest in a perspective of justice known as therapeutic jurisprudence. Therapeutic jurisprudence is the study of how the law impacts on emotional and psychological well being of individuals who experience the law, particularly offenders and victims, to determine ways in which the law can enhance wellbeing (Birgden & Ward, 2003; Petrucci, 2002). Proponents of therapeutic jurisprudence and restorative justice have promoted the use of apology, believing it maximises positive therapeutic consequences by restoring relationships and repairing harm (Petrucci, 2002). It is acknowledged, however, in the criminal context, the restoration of relationships may not always be the goal, particularly following specific criminal offences such as sexual assault by a stranger.

In Australia the retributive justice system, in most cases, focuses on the actions of the offender against the state, thus effectively ignoring the victim and requiring minimal participation from offenders (Umbreit, 1994). Retributive justice is a theory of justice that deems that an acceptable response to crime is proportionate punishment in order to satisfy victims, their intimates and society (Vidmar, 2000). This often results in discomfort for the offender, resulting in the biblical phrase that has become colloquial, an eye for an eye. Retributive punishment is therefore considered retrospective as it focuses on punishing offenders for their crimes, according to the severity of the offence (Vidmar, 2000). Western Australian prisons and detention centres are already overcrowded and the number of prisoners in Western Australia continues to escalate. Court intervention, diversionary, rehabilitation and restorative justice programs provide an alternative to imprisonment for some offenders (Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, 2009). Nevertheless, retributive justice frameworks continue to dominate the criminal justice system; focussing on punishing offenders, even though it is recognised that the process does not always consider victim needs (Exline, Worthington, & McCullough, 2003).

Contrary to the view portrayed by the media that the general public demands politicians and criminal justice officials get tougher on crime, the general public appear to be less vindictive, and instead, more supportive of restorative justice principles than retributive ones (Doob, 2000; McKillop & Helmes, 2003; Umbreit, 1994). Restorative justice provides an alternative model to retribution that focuses on the individual and/or community, rather than the state (Braithwaite, 2002). Apology and forgiveness

constitute important components of the restorative justice process (Strelan, Feather, & McKee, 2008). An apology is provided during an interaction between the offender and the offended, and the ideal process involves, firstly, the call for an apology, which is then followed by the apology, and concludes with forgiveness (Tavuchis, 1991).

Forgiveness does not require forgetting, condoning or excusing offensive behaviour; it does not imply reconciliation or trust, and finally, forgiveness does not release offenders from legal consequences (Exline, et al., 2003). Instead, forgiveness is defined as a motivational change from unforgiving motivations and emotions, such as feelings of anger, betrayal, hurt and or bitterness, to forgiving motivations and emotions (Witvliet, Worthington, Root, Sato, Ludwig, & Exline, 2008). To explain, victims firstly acknowledge the seriousness of the offence, and still, then make a decision to release these feelings and cease to feel negatively towards the other individual, no longer hating them or desiring revenge (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998, cited in Exline et al., 2003, p. 339; Estrada-Hollenbeck, 1996). The individual who has been offended against is described as forgiving when their response is conciliatory and constructive, to restore trust or good will, to bring about agreement in a helpful manner (Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004). There is substantial evidence that apologies increase victim's levels of forgiveness, which has been shown to have psychological and physical benefits for the person who has forgiven (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Petrucci, 2002; Witvliet et al., 2008; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002).

Forgiveness is also of benefit to offenders, as victims' decisions to forgive may reduce their own feelings of anger and aggression (Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Zechmeister et al., 2004) resulting in victims responding more constructively towards offenders (Allan, 2007; McCullough et al., 1997). Furthermore, offenders psychologically benefit from being forgiven. For example, research conducted by Estrada-Hollenbeck (1996) involved autobiographical narrative analysis of a number of phenomena including criminal activity. Based on the premise that there is more than one side to a story, participants were required to describe a meaningful life situation, from varying perspectives. Eighty-three participants were randomly assigned to one of four tasks, which varied in perspective (victim or perpetrator) and forgiveness (did occur, versus did not occur). Affect prior to and following the situation were also explored. Estrada-Hollenbeck's (1996) results revealed that when forgiveness did not occur, victims' explained that the perpetrator did not suffer, that he or she did not make amends beyond an apology, and the victim did not believe the perpetrator sincerely felt guilty. When

forgiveness did occur, both victims and perpetrators described the occurrence of an apology, and that the perpetrator attempted to make amends, and that he or she felt sincerely guilty. Estrada-Hollenbeck's (1996) study revealed that forgiveness does affect perpetrators' emotions, as perpetrators felt less negative about situations in which they were forgiven. However, the greatest benefit appears to remain with victims as when compared to one another, victims were far more negative than perpetrators' when forgiveness did not occur, and significantly more positive than perpetrators when forgiveness did occur. However, as pointed out by Allan et al. (2006), an apology does not always result in forgiveness.

Unfortunately, people may not know how to forgive, or they may not be able to or want to develop forgiveness when they have been wronged, and the consequence for victims may be unforgiveness (Estrada-Hollenbeck, 1996). Unforgiveness encompasses a stress-reaction that may result in ill health (Witvliet et al., 2008; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). The above named stress-reaction has been demonstrated by brain activity, hormonal patterns, sympathetic nervous system activity, and tension in facial muscles during unforgiveness, being consistent when experiencing both unforgiveness and stress (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Victims' unwillingness to forgive may, therefore, result in health problems, for example cardiovascular disease (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). As researchers have demonstrated a positive association between apology and forgiveness, there appears to be the potential to reduce the health risks of unforgiveness with an effective apology (Allan & McKillop, 2010; Exline et al., 2003). Given the extensive literature on apology and forgiveness benefits, it appears important to establish which apology factors, disregarding individual characteristics of victims, influence apology rejection.

Apology, Acceptance and Rejection

An apology is effective when there is a transfer of shame and power from the victim to the offender (Lazare, 1995). An offender surrenders his or her power to the offended individual and/or group and removes the shame from the victim and places it on himself (Schneider, 2000). For the rebalancing of power to occur, the offender must make a genuine plea and, in order to be perceived as sincere, offenders must seem sorry (Schneider, 2000). Recent research that proposes a model of authentic apology that specifically links offender remorse and perceived sincerity (Slocum, 2006) will be discussed later in this review.

When an apology is offered there is the chance that it may be refused (Schneider, 2000). Rejected apologies may have serious social consequences, as failed

apologies may, “strain relationships beyond repair, or worse, create life-long grudges and bitter vengeance” (Lazare, 1995, p. 40). To reduce the likelihood of an apology being rejected, the apology must be constructed in a meaningful way, with sincerity conveyed by the offender and perceived by the victim. To examine how this can be done, Choi and Severson (2009) conducted research on the procedure of composing, delivering and receiving an apology in the restorative justice context. The authors adopted a qualitative research design that gained multiple perspectives of victim offender mediation. Interestingly, Choi and Severson (2009) found that, in all four criminal cases investigated, the victims accepted letters of apology, however, all of the victims later questioned the sincerity of the apologies. In particular, victims raised concerns regarding the absence of focus on their needs in the apology, with one victim stating, “he didn’t even mention me in the letter” (Choi & Severson, 2009, p. 818). Victims, therefore, appear to accept an apology even when they remain unconvinced by them (Allan, 2007; Bennett & Earwaker, 1994). Of concern, however, is that these victims, although outwardly accepting, may experience the apology as further insult added to their injuries as a result of this perceived lack of sincerity, which in turn reduces the potential for forgiving (Allan, 2007).

Research on apology rejection is scarce and, one possible reason may be that the recipients of apologies are generally reluctant to reject them (Bennett & Dewberry, 1994; Bennett & Earwaker, 1994). Bennett and Dewberry (1994) conducted a study whereby participants who were university students aged between 18 and 46 years participated across two experiments involving hypothetical situations. Participants were asked to indicate how they would respond to an unconvincing apology for a moderately serious transgression. Results revealed that explicit rejection of an apology was extremely rare, with only 8% of participants showing offence toward the apology (i.e., failure to accept) and the vast majority (88%) accepting the apology (Bennett & Dewberry, 1994).

Bennett and Earwaker (1994), who studied the conditions under which an apology is accepted or rejected, provided additional support for the notion that there is immense pressure to accept apologies. The researchers attempted to identify the factors that determine whether an apology is accepted or rejected; predicting that apology acceptance is related to offenders’ responsibility and to the seriousness of the offence (Bennett & Earwaker, 1994). In an independent subjects design, 200 participants, aged between 17 and 47 years of age, were provided with one of two hypothetical scenarios with high-responsibility and low-responsibility conditions and high-severity and low-

severity conditions. The researchers concluded that the extent to which victim's anger was dissipated by the apology was significantly related to the severity of the offence (i.e., level of harm or damage), but not to offender responsibility (i.e., accident vs. intentional), and further, anger was dissipated more easily when the harm was not as serious. Importantly, the study revealed that the likelihood of an apology being rejected is remarkably small, even when there is considerable provocation. The emerging themes thus far appear to be that victims are reluctant to reject apologies, even when they are unconvinced by them (Bennett & Dewberry, 1994) and even when provocation is high (Bennett & Earwaker, 1994). The findings that people can publicly accept apologies while privately doubting their authenticity has implications for situations such as mediation, in contexts such as restorative justice. In such cases an apparently successful outcome could in fact be one in which the benefits of genuine acceptance and forgiveness are not realised, or at worst, in which conflict and unforgiveness is exacerbated by a failed apology.

One possible reason as to why victims may feel obliged to accept an apology is due to perceived pressure from witnesses (Bennett & Dewberry, 1994). Interestingly, in the study by Bennett and Dewberry (1994) victims who received and rejected an apology were viewed least positively by participants than when they accepted an apology, and that apology rejection was perceived by the participant as resulting in a greater amount of damage to the relationship between victim and offender than when the victim accepted an apology. Therefore, if victims have concerns regarding others' judgement of their responses, those concerns may be well founded. Although the results are convincing, the researchers failed to examine more than the two factors of offence severity and offender responsibility, thus effectively ignoring the influence of important circumstances such as apology sincerity on the likelihood of apology acceptance and forgiveness. Nonetheless, Bennett and Dewberry's (1994) findings indicated pronounced target-observer differences in reactions to apologies and the difference was attributed by the researchers to victims and observers' differing motivations to be seen positively by others, their motivation to feel good and, the social scripts that constrain victim responses more than observer responses. To further explain, a social script in response to apology is most often formed at a young age, as children are taught to both apologise when they have done something wrong and to accept apologies when offered. Due to the frequency with which apologies are offered and accepted in social situations, a well-practiced social script is formed, resulting in recipients of future apologies unlikely to respond with rejection, even when they may desire to do so (Risen &

Gilovich, 2007). Given this socially ingrained phenomenon, victims may feel as though they must also accept any apology offered (Risen & Gilovich, 2007).

The idea that victims may feel that any apology offered should be accepted is supported by Darby and Schlenker (1989), who examined how children receive apologies. Results revealed that, regardless of how the children felt about the apology, some form of forgiveness followed and offenders received less severe punishment than if they did not apologise (Darby & Schlenker, 1989). It is noted, however, the significant findings could be attributed to the research design, as the within-subject design may have actually encouraged participants to respond differently to each of the apologies. Nonetheless, the research obtained on apology acceptance continues to suggest that victims will accept an apology when offered, however it is acknowledged that previous research is limited.

Additional support for Bennett and Dewberry's (1994) findings is provided by Risen and Gilovich (2007) whose study entailed five experiments involving university students whereby simulated predicaments were manipulated in a laboratory setting. Risen and Gilovich (2007) examined reactions to sincere and insincere apologies after real-life interactions. Sincerity was manipulated by having the harmdoer apologise spontaneously or whilst under coercion. The experiments required target participants to be the victims of relatively minor wrongdoings and observers to witness the blameworthy acts. Results revealed that victims responded in the same way when receiving spontaneously or coerced apologies, demonstrating their willingness to accept any apology offered. Further, in the second study, victims viewed any apology more favourably than no apology at all, emphasising the importance for victims to receive an apology. In summation, from the literature it appears, therefore, that for observers an apology is most effective when made voluntarily, however for victims coerced apologies may still be of some value (Latif, 2001). Thus surfaces another interesting theme. Whilst it is acknowledged that the best apology is a spontaneous apology, it is suggested that a formal apology (whether or not it is coerced) is useful because the exercise itself teaches a valuable lesson for the offenders (Garvey, 1998) and in addition, given victims' tendencies to accept an apology offered, it is suggested that perhaps victims may be healed in some way after an apology, even when the apology is coerced or encouraged by mediators (Latif, 2001).

Victims' Perceptions of Sincerity

A review of the apology literature has indicated there are no clear findings on what constitutes an effective apology and what elements of an apology impact on

perceptions of sincerity (Allan, 2007; Schmitt et al., 2004). An extensive search of the psychology databases, namely Academic OneFile, Academic Research Library (Proquest), Proquest 5000 International, Proquest Social Science Journals, PsycARTICLES, PsychINFO and Sage Journals, was conducted. The search, using the keywords “apology”, “sincere”, “focus” and “components”, yielded virtually no literature addressing the specific area of apology focus and perceptions of sincerity, however the research that does exist has been discussed in this review. It was discovered that only two articles connected apology and sincerity (Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Risen & Gilovich, 2007) but neither investigated the nature of apology or what aspects caused them to be perceived as more or less sincere.

A review of the literature relating to apology acceptance did reveal, however, that although victims may be willing to accept apologies when offered, they might not be so willing to forgive the offender. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that forgiving is enhanced by an apology. For example, Allan and associates (2006) found that victims of gross human rights violations were more likely to forgive when an apology was offered. However, the researchers revealed that not just *any* apology offered has the ability to enhance forgiveness. Instead, the findings indicated that after a serious misconduct, apology significantly promotes forgiveness, only when true sorrow is perceived by the offended person (Allan et al., 2006). As literature revealed that forgiving could improve victims’ psychological functioning and, furthermore, that apologies can encourage forgiving, it became important to understand what aspects of apologies promote offender forgiveness (Allan et al., 2006). Consequently, Allan and colleagues (2006) recommended that further empirical research be conducted to establish apology as an operationally defined construct and to develop an instrument to measure the level of sincerity of offenders’ apologies as perceived by the offended person.

Further to these recommendations, Slocum (2006) conducted a study to explore the differences between apology and true sorrow within intimate relationships. The study involved 23 participants, aged 26 to 58 years, who had experienced a serious offence by their intimate partner (e.g., adultery or domestic violence) during their committed relationship, with the wrongdoing committed within the past two years of the relationship existing for two years or more. The study involved participants engaging in an in-depth semi-structured interview regarding the offence, the type of apology received, if any, how sincere the apology was, and whether they were able to forgive the offender. The interview was followed by a brief questionnaire. A qualitative

analysis of the responses revealed that participants made a clear distinction between an apology and true sorrow, and findings indicated that participants were more forgiving when they received an apology, and markedly more forgiving when they perceived their intimate partner was truly sorry (Slocum, 2006).

Authentic Apology Model

From the data obtained, Slocum (2006) developed the AA model, a two-dimensional theoretical model of apologetic behaviour. The first dimension entailed three components; affirmation, affect and action, with the second dimension measuring the degree to which the offender has a self-focus or self-other focus. According to the model, the affirmation component of an apology reflects the wrongdoer's admission of responsibility for the behaviour; the affect component referred to the wrongdoer's emotional response to the behaviour, and lastly, the action component incorporates the wrongdoer's efforts to repair the harm their behaviour had caused (Slocum, 2006). On the second dimension of the Slocum's (2006) model, the offender's focus in the apology is said to operate along a continuum, indicating the extent to which the offender considers the impact of the offence on him/herself only (self-focus), and the degree to which they focus on the victim's needs, as well as their own (self-other focus).

Slocum's (2006) study revealed that behaviour classified as a self-focussed apology involved the wrongdoer's admission of liability for the wrong, their communication of regret that the wrong had occurred, and finally, their offer of restitution to make up for the wrong. Participants considered these three components to be self-focussed because they emphasised the needs of the offender, rather than the needs of the victim (Allan, 2007). Contrastingly, a self-other focussed apology was offered when in addition to the self-focussed components offenders acknowledged the harm caused, expressed sorrow for harming the victim, and attempted to repair the harm by addressing victims' needs (Slocum, 2006). The author found that for forgiveness to take place, the victim needed to regard the offender as truly sorry and this involved an apology that focussed on the needs of the victim, as well as their own needs; in other words a self-other focussed apology (Allan, 2007). In summary, the findings of Slocum's (2006) research revealed that victims are more likely to perceive an apology as sincere if it incorporates affirmation, affect and action at the self-other end of a focus continuum and includes the elements of acknowledgement, remorse and reparation, respectively.

There has been some investigation of Slocum's (2006) theory. Attwood (2008) provided 70 participants from the general population with a hypothetical scenario about

an offence of a mildly serious nature. In the scenario, a 15-year old boy broke a neighbour's window whilst playing football. No formal charges were laid as a result of the neighbour's decision to, instead, seek an apology. The results obtained by Attwood (2008) failed to support the hypothesis that the self-other focussed apology would be more likely than a self-focussed apology to be seen as remorseful and as addressing the needs of the person who had been offended against. Instead, the study's findings revealed that the self-focussed apologies were seen to be more indicative of remorse and a focus on the victim's needs. Further, it was found that participants perceived the self-focussed apology to be more authentic than the self-other focussed apology. In addition, a perceived lack of sincerity with the self-other focussed apology further offended the participants in that condition. It is noted, however, that as the language used by Attwood (2008) to create the self-other focussed apology was later revealed to not be seen as appropriate for a 15-year old offender, its authenticity was reduced. To explain, participants indicated they believed the apology was manufactured and/or sarcastic, due to the age of the offender being incongruent with the wording. Importantly then, Attwood's (2008) findings highlighted the significance of apology wording and perceptions of sincerity, as participants who believed an apology was authentic, even though it focussed only on the needs of the offender, were more likely to believe that the apology addressed the needs of the victim.

Apology in the Juvenile Justice Setting

When offenders are juveniles and their offences are of a non-violent nature, restorative justice is most frequently applied (Exline et al., 2003). Antisocial behaviour amongst adolescents is often temporary and situational (Moffitt, 1993). Criminal activity, in adolescent years, is often specific to the period of development and corresponding causal factors, and offending is most likely to desist with maturity (Moffitt, 1993). If juvenile offending is likely to undergo natural remission, it therefore appears fundamental to understand that the stakeholder requiring most attention throughout the Court process becomes the victim.

A restorative justice approach places strong emphasis on empowering victims and the young offender's families, rather than punishing offenders (Bibas & Bierschbach, 2004). In Western Australia juvenile justice teams are available to young offenders who are, most often, in the early stages of offending (Department of Corrective Services, 2009; Hakiha, 1994) and restorative justice programs for juveniles include family group conferencing (Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, 2009). The family group conference includes the young person who committed the

offence, their parents, and the victim of the offence. In addition, police officers and juvenile justice staff members provide professional support (Department of Corrective Services, 2009). The police or the Children's Court undertakes the referral, however, to be included in restorative justice procedures, offenders must admit their guilt and be prepared to make amends (Department of Corrective Services, 2009).

During the family group conference participants create a contract called an action plan to address the offending behaviour and the victim's needs (Department of Corrective Services, 2009). The action plan may entail compensating victims and/or repairing or replacing damaged or stolen items (Department of Corrective Services, 2009). In addition, the action plan usually requires offenders to apologise to victims if this has not already occurred spontaneously during the conference (Department of Corrective Services, 2009). An apology is encouraged as providing an apology allows the offender to take responsibility for their behaviour and may foster reintegration (Petrucci, 2002).

The primary objective of family group conferencing, therefore, is to improve victim satisfaction (Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, 2009; Stewart, 1996). If victims have perceived sincere remorse in the young person, they may be able to move from anger to forgiveness, by accepting offered apologies (Stewart, 1996). In addition, it is hoped that offenders will appreciate expressions of forgiveness, such as the above, and be deterred from repeat offences (Exline et al., 2003). The critical criteria for determining whether harm is repaired and social harmony is restored includes whether offenders, their families and victims see the process positively, whether or not they feel involved in decision-making, and their satisfaction with the outcomes achieved (Maxwell & Morris, 1996). A variety of reasons have been provided as to why victims are not satisfied with the outcomes and subsequently have negative experiences. The most frequently cited reason for dissatisfaction by Maxwell and Morris (1996) was that the offender and his or her family did not appear sincerely sorry, with only half of the victims in previous research satisfied. One way of increasing satisfaction is ensuring victims' needs are met, including facilitation of an apology that they perceive as sincere and that they may, therefore, be more likely to accept.

Present Study

More work needs to be done to clarify what aspects of an apology impact on its acceptability and perceived sincerity. Such research would be especially relevant to restorative justice practices, particularly with juvenile offenders. Implications of findings for the criminal justice system may include the development of programs that

may enhance offenders' awareness of victims' needs. By understanding perceptions of sincerity and what exactly increases the acceptability of apologies, victim satisfaction may be improved.

As there is substantial evidence that the probability of apology acceptance and forgiving is increased by an apology that is perceived as sincere, the purpose of the current research was to use Slocum's (2006) theory of authentic apology to identify how sincerity is perceived. The theory suggests victims are more likely to perceive an apology as sincere if it incorporates three core components (affirmation, affect and action) at the self-other end of a focus continuum. The current study used Slocum's (2006) theory in the context of restorative justice to compare the impact of a self-focussed apology, where the offender is depicted as attempting to ease their own personal distress, to a self-other focussed apology, where the offender is depicted as attempting to address the needs of the victim, as well as themselves. It was hypothesised that when the core components of affect, affirmation and action in the apology have a self-other focus, participants would be more likely to perceive the offender's apology as sincere than if the apology had a self-focus. Further, it was expected that participants would be more likely to accept the self-other focussed apology than the self-focussed apology and would be more likely to forgive the offender.

Method

Design

A quantitative research design was used, in which supplementary open-ended questions were included for potential illumination and clarification. The independent variable for this between groups study was apology focus, with the two levels of self-focus and self-other focus. The apology focus was shifted by combining and manipulating the components; affirmations, affect and actions, identified by Slocum (2006). Apology A portrayed a self-focus, and in line with the recommendations made by Slocum (2006), the offender displayed admission of responsibility (affirmation), regret (affect) and restitution as appeasement (action). Apology B also consisted of the above named components, however, in addition portrayed a self-other focus, with the offender acknowledging harm done to the victim (affirmation), remorse for the harm done (affect) and reparation as atonement (action).

The dependent variables included whether participants perceived the apology as sincere, whether participants accepted the apology offered, and finally, whether participants forgave the offender. To measure the dependent variables, participants were asked to respond by indicating yes or no on the questionnaire to each of the above-

named questions. In addition, the participant was asked to indicate how they reached their decisions, with adequate space provided on the questionnaire. This forced-choice quantitative response format, followed by the provision for qualitative explanation, was chosen for its potential to yield more meaningful data than a simple analysis that compared categorical responses. As argued by Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003), a qualitative aspect may complement and clarify quantitative results; additionally allowing any contradictions to be discovered.

Participants

The sample consisted of 60 voluntary participants (26 males; 34 females) recruited from the Perth metropolitan area through community networking, whereby friends, family and colleagues of the researcher were informed of the study through the information letter distributed by email and in person. All of the participants were at least 18 years of age, with 39 participants aged between 18 and 40 years, 19 participants aged between 41 and 60 years, and 2 participants over the age of 61 years. Not all of the participants were contacts of the researcher, as people were asked to pass on the invitation to participate to networks of their own. It is noted that 38 participants had been the victim of a previous theft-related crime, whereas 22 participants had not.

Materials

The information letter provided to all personal contacts outlined the research aims and the voluntary and confidential nature of participation in the study (see Appendix A). The letter contained contact numbers for free counselling services, in the event that the participant became distressed as a result of their participation. The likelihood of any distress, however, was extremely low. Those individuals who indicated they were willing to participate in the study were required to read and sign the informed consent document (see Appendix B).

The first component of a vignette provided to participants consisted of a statement of material facts. This provided a brief description of how a burglary offence had been committed, as well as the details of the offender's apprehension by police (see Appendix C). It is noted that this information would ordinarily be provided to, or known by victims, during victim-offender mediation. It was acknowledged that the nature of the offending behaviour in the previous study conducted by Attwood (2008) could have been perceived as accidental, as the offender unintentionally brought about the predicament. Alternatively, it could have been perceived as negligent, where the offender failed to foresee the negative outcome of his actions, whereas any other reasonable person would have (Gonzales, Manning, & Haugen, 1992). Offences that are

referred to the juvenile justice teams as suitable for victim-offender mediation usually involve intentional transgressions, where there is no doubt that the victim has been wronged and the offender is personally responsible for the harm done (Gonzales et al., 1992). Therefore, in the current study the vignette was significantly modified from the vignette constructed by Attwood (2008), to describe an offence of burglary. In addition, an offence of a relatively serious nature was chosen, as it was suggested by Attwood (2008) and Slocum (2006) that a range of offences should be examined to reveal if, and when, a self-other focussed apology may be more appropriate than a self-focussed apology. Furthermore, to improve the research design, the vignette and apologies in the current study were pre-tested to ensure that participants did not perceive the language used by the offender to be insulting, and to ensure that the language used in the apology was congruent with that expected of a 15-year old.

The second component of the vignette consisted of the Court Proceedings, which informed participants of the juvenile justice team process (see Appendix C). In addition, participants were informed of how the apology occurred in order to ensure that they did not become distracted by the false perception that the offender was forced to provide an apology.

The apology vignettes were created based on Slocum's (2006) model. Apology A portrayed a self-focus, stating, "I regret what I did and I know that it was wrong. I won't do this again as I have learnt my lesson. I am sorry" (see Appendix D). Apology B portrayed a self-other focus, stating, "I feel bad for making you feel afraid. It must have been scary for you, coming home and seeing that someone else had been there. I won't do this again and I am sorry for the harm I caused you. I will do anything to make you feel better" (see Appendix E). In both apology conditions the stolen items were returned to the owner. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and respond to the demographic questions, including whether they had been the victim of a theft-related offence (see Appendix D and E).

Procedure

The scenarios were pre-tested to determine whether both apologies appeared congruent with the language used by a 15-year old offender. Six participants were recruited from community networks for the purpose of the pre-test, and they were instructed to read the scenario and both apologies. The participants were then interviewed to determine their opinions on whether the statement of material facts, the Court proceedings and the apologies appeared realistic and whether the instructions were easy to understand. From their responses it was concluded that the material did not

require amendment. These six participants did not form part of the main research sample.

Potential participants were then provided with the information letter, distributed in person and by email. Those individuals who indicated their interest in volunteering were provided with the informed consent document, the scenario and one of the two apologies. Participants were randomly assigned an apology, by the order in which they volunteered. For example, the first participant was allocated Apology A, and the second participant was allocated Apology B, and so forth. Once the survey had been completed, the participants were asked to place the document and consent form in an envelope, to be collected in person by the researcher, or to be returned through the postal system. To facilitate this, a pre-paid envelope was provided to participants. To ensure the confidentiality of participants in the study, each participant was identified by a number, upon receipt of the questionnaire, which simply represented the order in which they returned their surveys, with the first recognised by P#1 and so on.

Results

Results were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 17. To examine whether there was an association between apology focus, and the three categorical variables of perceptions of sincerity, apology acceptance and forgiveness, participants' categorical responses were analysed using three two-way chi-square analyses. The first chi-square test examined whether apology focus was related to individuals' perceptions of sincerity. The second chi-square test determined whether apology focus was related to apology acceptance. Finally, the third chi-square test identified whether apology focus was related to the number of participants who forgave the offender. The odds ratio was then calculated to measure the effect size for the relationships, to conclude whether or not apology focus was significantly associated with perceived sincerity, apology acceptance and forgiveness. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Observed Data on Sincerity, Acceptance and Forgiveness Measures by Apology Type

		Type of Apology		
Measures		Apology A (Self-focus) (n = 30)	Apology B (Self-other focus) (n = 30)	Total (n = 60)
Apology Sincerity	Sincere	16	25	41
	Insincere	14	5	19
Apology Acceptance	Accept	20	27	47
	Reject	10	3	13
Forgiveness	Forgave	18	21	39
	Did not forgive	12	9	21

Perceptions of Sincerity

Sixteen participants who responded to Apology A (53.3%) perceived the apology as sincere and 46.7% did not. For those participants who received Apology B, 83.3% perceived the apology as sincere, compared to 16.7% that did not. There was a significant association between the type of apology and whether or not it was perceived as sincere $\chi^2 (1) = 6.24, p < .05$. If a participant received the self-other focussed apology (Apology B) the odds of perceiving the apology as sincere were 4.37 times higher than if the participant received Apology A. For these data, the contingency coefficient is 0.307 out of a possible maximum value of 1. This represents a medium association between the type of apology and whether the apology was perceived as sincere or not (Field, 2009). This value is significant ($p < .05$).

Apology Acceptance

Twenty participants who received Apology A (66.7%) accepted the apology and 33.3% did not. For those participants who received Apology B, 90% accepted the apology, compared to 10% that did not. There was a significant association between the type of apology and whether or not the apology was accepted $\chi^2 (1) = 4.812, p < .05$. If a participant received Apology B the odds of accepting the apology were 4.5 times higher than if the participant received Apology A. For these data, the contingency coefficient is 0.272 out of a possible maximum value of 1. This represents a medium association between the type of apology and whether the apology was accepted or not (Field, 2009). This value is significant ($p < .05$).

Forgiveness

After receiving Apology A, 60% of participants indicated they forgave the offender and 40% did not. For those participants who received Apology B, 70% indicated they forgave the offender, compared to 30% that did not. There was a non-significant association between the type of apology and whether or not the participant forgave the offender $\chi^2 (1) = .659, p > .05$. For these data, the contingency coefficient statistic is 0.104 out of a possible maximum value of 1. This represents a minimal association between the type of apology and forgiveness (Field, 2009). This value is non-significant ($p > .05$). It is noted that the odds ratio revealed that if a participant received Apology B the odds of forgiving the offender were 1.55 times higher than if the participant received Apology A.

Open-ended Questions

Responses to the open-ended questions about participants' reasons for their yes/no decisions were content analysed so that general concepts could be collated into emergent themes (Silverman, 2006). These themes will be discussed in the following section of this thesis in order to interpret and add meaning to the findings described here. This structure is considered appropriate as the responses about reasoning were not intended to provide qualitative data in the form of results, rather they were sought as a potential source of clarification and illumination of the quantitative analysis and are, therefore, interpretive.

Discussion

The current study investigated the association between apology focus and perceptions of sincerity, apology acceptance and forgiveness using Slocum's (2006) theory of apology. Results supported the first and second experimental hypotheses. Firstly, it was hypothesised that when the core components of affect, affirmations and actions in the apology have a self-other focus, the participants would be more likely to perceive the offender's apology as sincere. The results support this hypothesis, as there was a significant association between the type of apology and whether or not it was perceived as sincere. As hypothesised, the odds of perceiving the apology as sincere were significantly greater after receiving a self-other focussed apology. More specifically, the odds of a participant perceiving an apology as sincere were 4.37 times higher if they received an apology with a self-other focus, compared to self-focussed apology.

The second hypothesis in the current study was that participants would be more likely to accept the apology if the apology incorporated the three core components

(affirmation, affect and action) at the self-other end of a focus continuum. The results support this hypothesis, as there was a significant association between the type of apology and whether or not the apology was accepted. As hypothesised, the odds of accepting the apology were significantly greater if participants received Apology B, rather than Apology A. Specifically, the odds of a participant accepting an apology were 4.5 times higher if they received an apology with a self-other focus, compared to a self-focussed apology.

The final investigation in the current study, investigated whether forgiving was increased by an apology with a self-other focus. Forgiveness after receiving a self-focussed apology was compared to forgiving following a self-other focussed apology. It was hypothesised that when the core components of affect, affirmation and action in the apology have a self-other focus participants would be more likely to forgive the offender. The results failed to support this hypothesis.

Sincerity

Participants' responses to the open-ended questions revealed several significant themes, which provided support for Slocum's (2006) model. To recap, Slocum (2006) identified affect, affirmation and action as apologetic components, with offender focus at one end of the continuum said to be directed at their own needs (self-focussed) and at the other end, indicating awareness of victims' needs as well as their own (self-other focussed). Content analysis of the qualitative data revealed that upon receipt of the self-other focussed apology, several participants identified that the above named components led to their perception that the apology was sincere.

Firstly, Slocum (2006) identified that for the affect component to have a self-other focus offenders should express remorse through strong feelings of sadness and guilt when learning of, and understanding, victim suffering. Participants in the self-other focussed condition indicated that they believed the offender was emotionally affected by the harm caused to the victim. The theme is summarised in the following quotes:

He appeared remorseful (P#12).

James' apology indicated to me that he had put some thought into his apology, possibly even felt empathy for me as a victim (P#40).

Because he imagined the victim's fear/feelings (P#50).

In contrast, participants who received the self-focussed apology were able to identify why they did not perceive the apology as sincere. The theme is summarised in the following quotes:

Hasn't shown any regret towards the victim, other than returning what wasn't his (P#15).

The apology did not really feel heart felt, or like he tried to reach out to me forgiveness (P#17).

Doesn't use any emotive language to explain how he feels, just says what everyone would in that situation (P#5).

Secondly, Slocum (2006) described affirmation as the verbal component of the apology, with acknowledgement requiring offenders to express their understanding of the suffering caused to victims. The theme is summarised in the following quotes:

He acknowledged that I would have felt scared seeing someone in my house. He identified that it would have caused harm (P#14).

James verbalised his remorse (P#20).

He has put himself in my position and has realised that I may have been frightened and upset (P#24).

Sounds very sincere and didn't just say sorry, he also acknowledged that I would have felt afraid (P#26).

He not only apologised for breaking in but also for me not feeling very safe and by him himself giving me back the money (P#28).

I feel he made a thoughtful apology (P#32).

The fact that James made a point to apologise for the fear he may have caused as well as apologising for his actions indicates sincerity (P#42).

He has considered the feelings of the victim (P#54).

Contrastingly, again, participants who received the self-focussed apology were able to identify why they did not perceive the apology as sincere. The theme is summarised in the following quote, *He has not explained what lesson he learnt and has not acknowledged how it may have impacted on victim (P#21).*

Finally, according to Slocum's (2006) theory, action involves offenders' behavioural attempts to repair harm and restore the offence situation (Slocum, 2006). One of the most consistent findings in the present study was that participants who

perceived the apology as sincere expressed the importance of the offender doing something or offering something to prove that they were sincerely sorry for the harm caused. This theme is summarised in the following quotes:

He said 'I will do anything to make you feel better'. Indicates high degree of victim empathy and shame (P#14).

Sought to make amends for his actions through repayment and return of the iPod. This demonstrates that James has thought about his actions (P#20).

He has openly asked to make amends on top of what the Court was also going to appoint to him (P#54).

Therefore, the themes in the current research corresponds to the affect, affirmation and action components of Slocum's (2006) theory, which suggests that offenders' expression of sorrow (affect), their acknowledgement of victim suffering (affirmation) and their behavioural attempts to correct the offence situation (action) are important to victims. In summary, the present data suggests that when offenders apologise with a self-other focus they are more likely to be perceived as sincere.

Apology Acceptance

Given that the self-other focussed apology was also perceived more often as sincere, it was therefore anticipated and supported that participants would be more likely to accept the apology. The qualitative results illuminated this finding with participants' specific reference to the apology being perceived as sincere. This theme is summarised in the following quotes:

I accepted the apology as it was sincere. It will also assist James in the future that a wrong act can be forgiven if you are willing to make positive changes in your life. It also gives James time to reflect on his offending behaviour and realise that for every offence committed there is always a victim (P#11).

He appeared remorseful and the opportunity of acceptance may encourage him to not offend in the future (P#12).

It is noted that qualitative analysis of participants' responses to apologies in both conditions revealed that a large number appeared satisfied with the apology they were provided. It is therefore acknowledged that participants may have accepted the apology simply because it was offered. This finding appears to support the assertion that recipients of apologies are generally reluctant to reject them, and highlights that perhaps participants may, in fact, feel pressure to accept offered apologies (Bennett &

Dewberry, 1994; Bennett & Earwaker, 1994; Risen & Gilovich, 2007). Alternatively, the qualitative analysis may in some way support the argument that any apology, whether or not it is perceived as sincere, may heal victims in some way (Latif, 2001). It cannot be ignored, however, that the quantitative results indicated a significant association between the type of apology and whether or not the apology was accepted, demonstrating that apology focus is significantly related to apology acceptance.

In addition, the qualitative results illuminated that participants were able to appreciate that the apology ritual teaches offenders a valuable lesson (Garvey, 1998). For instance, several participants, particularly in the self-other focussed condition, recognised that accepting the apology offered would benefit the offender. Therefore, participants may have understood that the function of restorative justice is to promote healing, end conflict and restore relationships (Braithwaite, 2002). This theme is summarised in the following quotes:

Young offender, also showed insight into how the offending may have long term consequences for the victim. For a young person to demonstrate this level of insight into his offending behaviour (i.e. multidimensional – community, victim and own conduct) this demonstrates a positive reflection on own behaviour and therefore he needs to be supported, hence I would accept his apology (P#20). If the apology is genuine then it may assist in helping James to follow a more honest pathway. A refusal would obviate the need for mediation and would not allow a face-to-face meeting. I believe that offenders need to see the personal side/impact of impersonal actions (P#58).

It is, however, acknowledged that this may be related to Bennett and Dewberry's (1994) findings, which indicated victims are motivated to be seen positively by others and to feel good about themselves. Therefore, some participants may have indicated that they accepted the apology, particularly in the context of a survey, in order to achieve positive evaluation by the researcher.

Forgiveness

Although forgiveness results in the current study were not statistically significant, simply looking at the data gives the impression that, in terms of promoting forgiveness, the self-focussed apology had little effect, however, the self-other focussed apology did appear to be somewhat influential. This suggestion is further supported by the odds ratio, as the odds of forgiving the offender were 1.55 times higher if the participant received a self-other focussed apology when compared to a self-focussed

apology. Further, qualitative analysis of the data highlighted that one third of the participants in the self-focussed condition indicated that the harm was not repaired by the apology interaction, in comparison to five participants who indicated the harm was repaired. In contrast, over one third of the participants in the self-other focussed condition indicated that the harm *had* been repaired by the apology interaction, in comparison to only five participants who indicated that harm was not repaired. This seems to reveal that the apology condition had some impact on forgiving.

In addition, in the self-other focussed apology condition, four participants indicated they were *unwilling* to forgive the offender, which may be due to participant characteristics, rather than the apology provided, and it may have accounted for the lack of significant forgiveness findings overall. It is therefore concluded that some participants were unable or unwilling to forgive the offender, regardless of the apology they received, supporting the assertion that victims may be willing to accept apologies when offered, however they may not be so willing to forgive (Allan et al., 2006).

Importantly, however, most of the participants in the study were forgiving, regardless of the apology condition, thus emphasising that forgiveness may be enhanced by an apology (Allan et al., 2006). It is acknowledged, however, that participants may have been motivated to come across as a forgiving person so the audience did not look down on him or her (Risen & Gilovich, 2007). It is suggested, therefore, given the lack of consistent responses as to why forgiveness occurred that forgiveness emerged simply because victims desired to initiate it (Witvliet et al., 2008) and this is supported by the multitude of reasons provided for forgiveness motivations. The diverse themes are summarised in the following quotes:

Forgiveness is the only way for the victim to move forward. It has little to do with the perpetrator. If one can forgive, then the damage done has a more limited life" (P#58).

Better for your own health, so you can move on (P#12).

Forgiveness assists with the healing process for all parties concerned (P#11).

He is barely more than a child, whose life experiences and environment may have played a large part in contributing to his getting into trouble. Also, it was a relatively minor offence compared to say a physical assault on one's person. It's also important to be exposed to the concept of forgiveness to enable him to understand and grow from the experience (P#34).

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Limitations

To recap, the ideal interaction between an offender and the offended, particularly during victim offender mediation, is the offender giving the victim the opportunity to be heard (Maxwell & Morris, 1996), then the offender provides an apology, and this is followed by forgiveness (Tavuchis, 1991). Forgiveness is said to have occurred when the individual who has been offended against releases feelings of anger, betrayal, hurt and or bitterness, and responds in a conciliatory and constructive manner (Zechmeister et al., 2004). A possible explanation for the non-significant forgiveness findings, which can be specifically attributed to the study design, may be that the participants in the study were not given the opportunity to release these negative feelings. Perhaps future studies may incorporate a question, such as “Has the offence caused you any harm, and if so, how?” This would allow participants to disclose their negative feelings towards the offender and the offence, prior to responding to the apology sincerity, acceptance and forgiveness questions. By facilitating a release of these emotions, it may increase the likelihood of forgiveness and represent a more realistic apology interaction.

A further limitation of the current study is that it remains unclear whether participants may believe that they would be able to accept an apology and forgive the offender in a hypothetical situation, however, as a victim of an actual offence their behaviour may not be quite as they would predict. Contemplation has been given to methodological problems, and in an attempt to increase the level of consideration given by participants to their responses, participants were directed to indicate how they reached their decision, in order to contextualise the situation for them and to reduce the abstract nature of decision-making. As this study relied solely on hypothetical scenarios and responses and given that people’s predictions of their behavioural and emotional reactions are not always accurate; it is acknowledged that participants’ responses in real-life situations should be examined in future studies.

Furthermore, it is acknowledged that there are disadvantages to conducting surveys. When answering questions, people may not provide factual information, as they may fear negative judgement by the researcher (Martin, 2000). Participants were, therefore, assured on the information letter that the researcher would only know their identity and that they would not be able to be identified from the questionnaire. In an attempt to increase the honesty of their responses, the questionnaire stated, “Please respond honestly to the following survey as though you are the victim of the offence.”

It is also acknowledged that sincerity, apology acceptance and forgiveness in the current research were examined using a single, self-report item for each variable that asked participants to indicate the extent to which they perceived the apology as sincere, accepted the apology and forgave the offender. As a single item was used to assess each construct, the terms were open to idiographic interpretation. Therefore, participants may have differed in the meaning they ascribed to each term. In particular, given it remains unknown whether individuals forgive in degrees (i.e. not at all, to very much) or whether forgiveness is dichotomous (e.g., yes or no), additional work on the construct of forgiveness is required (Zechmeister et al., 2004).

A further potential limitation in the design of the research is the method in which participants were recruited. Convenience sampling is a method of recruiting participants that are easily accessible to the researcher (Kemper, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2003). The convenience of recruiting participants through community networks includes the reduced costs of conducting the research and the ease at which participants are accessed (Kemper et al., 2003). These benefits were, however, essential to a project of this size and timeline. As convenience sampling of volunteers may reduce the external validity of the results, and conclusions may not be generalisable, an attempt to overcome this was made, specifically the researcher requested that each participant suggest to other individuals from their community networks to participate in the study. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the use of a volunteer sample may make the sample susceptible to bias effects, as individuals who are willing to volunteer their time may be more likely to perceive an offender's apology as sincere regardless of the focus of the apology (Slocum, 2006). However, this is a limitation that applies to all ethically conducted research.

Future directions

As mentioned above, future research may be improved by reducing the idiographic interpretation of the terms sincerity, apology acceptance and forgiveness. In particular, given the non-significant forgiveness findings, future improvement in research design could be made by asking participants, for example, "Do you feel less negative about the offender and the offence?" rather than "Do you forgive the offender?" In addition, one participant raised the issue that the self-focussed apology did seem sincere, as the offender appeared genuinely remorseful for their offending behaviour, however, the participant stated that the offender did not appear remorseful for the impact of their offending on the victim. Therefore, the question may be more

appropriately phrased as, “Do you believe the offender is sincerely sorry for the harm he has caused you, given the apology provided?”

In addition, two participants in the self-focussed apology group communicated the desire to receive an explanation from the offender, which is said to be a key component of a full apology in Slocum’s (2006) theory. As this theme is not considered to be strong in the present study, however given its relevance to the affirmation component of the AA theory, the inclusion in future may improve research design. Finally, future research may be improved by examining perceptions of sincerity, apology acceptance and forgiveness following an actual interpersonal offence, rather than a hypothetical vignette; however, of course, ethical constraints limit the types and extent of harm that can be implemented in a laboratory setting (Zechmeister et al., 2004).

Conclusion

Despite the common occurrence of apologies in everyday social situations, and the recognition that they play an important role in law and positive psychological outcomes, there remains little consensus about what exactly constitutes an apology (Bruce, 2008; Sumner, 2006). It appears, however, the most effective apology is a sincere apology that leads to acceptance, which then may result in forgiveness (Petrucci, 2002). Acceptance of an apology and forgiveness may facilitate the restoration process, thus allowing relationships between parties to be restored (Petrucci, 2002).

Whilst the role of an apology in forgiveness and reconciliation has received significant attention, little research has been conducted on the effectiveness of what people say when they apologise and how the wording of apologies can alter whether they are perceived as sincere (Scher & Darley, 1997). Given that words that objectively satisfy the formal requirements of an apology may not have their desired effect if the offender is not being perceived as sincere (Allan et al., 2006) the current research endeavoured to reveal the impact of apology construction on perceptions of sincerity.

The current research findings reveal that manipulation of the affirmation, affect and action components in apology, using Slocum’s (2006) model, influences perceptions of sincerity and apology acceptance. Specifically, quantitative results and interpretation of qualitative data indicated that an apology with a self-other focus increases apology acceptance and result in a greater degree of perceived sincerity. However, in terms of forgiveness, participants were less influenced by the apology they received, thus supporting the assertion that apology does not always result in forgiveness (Allan et al., 2006).

Given the impact of apology focus on restorative justice outcomes in the study, it is anticipated that the results will hold significant value. The research may be applied to offender education programs that address conflict resolution. Liaison with representatives of the Department of Corrective Services revealed that currently young offenders are not provided with any instruction on what type of apology is appropriate to meet the needs of the victim. It is hoped, therefore, that the current research results will be useful in designing victim empathy training programs that may be provided prior to participation in family group conferences. This will enable young offenders to gain practical advice on how to demonstrate their feelings in a sincere manner, which may lead to better outcomes for the victim and the young person, particularly given a young offender may lack the skills to identify when an apology is appropriate and how to construct and deliver an apology.

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Appendix A: Information Letter to Participants

My name is Sophie Beesley and I am conducting a psychology research project as part of the requirements of a Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours degree at Edith Cowan University. I am seeking participants that are 18 years of age or older.

You are invited to participate in this research study that aims to examine the effect of an apology on restorative justice outcomes. The implications of this study are important for victim-offender mediation, juvenile justice team conferencing and conflict resolution. The Edith Cowan University Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Ethics Committee has approved the study. Participation is completely voluntary and you can withdraw from the research at any time.

To participate, please read and sign the informed consent document. The survey should require only a few minutes of your time, with an anticipated maximum time of ten minutes. You will be asked to read a brief scenario and respond to related questions. Please return the above documents, either in person or through the postal system. The envelope is pre-paid for your convenience.

The research may be published in scientific journals, however your identity will not be revealed. If you have any concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person, you may contact the Research Ethics Officer, Kim Gifkins on (08) 6304-2170 or email research.ethics@ecu.edu.au.

If you have any questions or require any further information about the research project please feel free to contact me on [REDACTED]

Alternatively, you may contact my supervisors, Professor Alfred Allan on (08) 6304-5536 or email a.allan@ecu.edu.au and/or Doctor Dianne McKillop on (08) 6304-5736 or email d.mckillop@ecu.edu.au.

The survey requires you to read a description of a burglary offence and answer some questions as though you are the victim of the offence. If you feel any distress as a result of your participation in this study, I recommend that you contact Lifeline on 13 11 14, Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636 or Crisis Care on (08) 9223-1111.

I sincerely appreciate your time and participation in this study,

Kind Regards,

Sophie Beesley

School of Psychology and Social Science

Edith Cowan University

Appendix B: Informed Consent Document

The Effect of Apology Focus on the Perceptions of Sincerity and the
Impact on Apology Acceptance and Forgiveness

I agree that I have been provided with a copy of the Information Letter, explaining the research study.

I agree that I have read and understood the information provided.

I agree that I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and any questions I have asked have been answered satisfactorily. I am aware that if I have any additional questions that I can contact the research team.

I understand that my participation in the research project will require me to read a brief scenario and answer three related questions. Further, I am aware that I will be asked to indicate, in writing, how I reached my conclusions.

I understand that the information provided will be kept confidential and that my identity will not be disclosed without consent.

I understand that the information provided will be used for the purposes of this research project and that the information will be analysed by the researcher.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from further participation at any time, without explanation or penalty.

I am aware that Edith Cowan University, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science have approved the research. I understand that the research team consists of Sophie Beesley [REDACTED] and her supervisors Professor Alfred Allan (08-6304-5536) and Doctor Dianne McKillop (08-6304-5736).

If you are 18 years of age or older, understand the statements above, and freely consent to participate in this study, please sign below.

Signed

Date

Appendix C: Scenario

Please read the following Statement of Material Facts and Court Proceedings. After reading the information provided you will be asked to respond to the questionnaire as if you are the victim of the following offence.

Statement of Material Facts

James is 15 years of age. On the way home from a party James walked past a house that was poorly lit and displayed no sign of residents in the premises. James jumped over the sidewall of the premises to gain access to the backyard of the house. He then located a rear window that was only protected by flywire. He pushed the glass window across and was able to squeeze through the gap to gain access to the inside of the house. Whilst inside, James rummaged around the kitchen for loose notes and coins and found approximately \$20.00. He then located an iPod, which he decided to also take. James then left the property through the gap in the rear window that he created. Only a few hundred metres from the victim's home, James was located by police and questioned regarding his activities. James admitted to the offence and was taken to the police station for questioning, during which time he made full admissions of guilt. James was then remanded on bail to appear in the Perth Children's Court.

Court Proceedings

When he appeared in Court James was referred to the Juvenile Justice Team, given that this was his first offence and he was willing to make amends for his actions.

Appendix D: Apology A

During the Family Group Conference James provides you with the following apology:
“I regret what I did and I know that it was wrong. I won’t do this again as I have learnt my lesson. I am sorry.” James then hands you an envelope with the \$20.00 inside that he stole from you. The Police Officer present during the mediation, also returns your iPod back to you, and it is in the same condition as before. The action plan formulated at the conclusion of the discussion acknowledged the apology provided and also entailed James’ doing 10 hours voluntary work in the community.

Please respond honestly to the following survey as though you are the victim of the offence.

Questions

1) Do you believe that the offender’s apology is sincere? ☐ Yes ☐ No (Please tick one)

Why/why not? (Please indicate)

2) Do you accept the apology? ☐ Yes ☐ No (Please tick one)

Why/why not? (Please indicate)

3) Do you forgive the offender?

☐ Yes

☐ No

(Please tick one)

Why/why not? (Please indicate)

Demographic Information

1) Please indicate your age range

(Please circle)

18 - 40 years

41 - 60 years

61+ years

2) Please indicate your biological gender

(Please circle)

Male

Female

3) Please indicate whether you have been the victim of a theft-related crime

previously

(Please circle)

Yes

No

Did you receive an apology from the offender?

(Please circle)

Yes

No

What were the consequences for you and the offender? (Please indicate)

Appendix E: Apology B

During the Family Group Conference James provides you with the following apology:

“I feel bad for making you feel afraid. It must have been scary for you, coming home and seeing that someone else had been there. I won’t do this again and I am sorry for the harm I caused you. I will do anything to make you feel better.” James then hands you an envelope with the \$20.00 inside that he stole from you. The Police Officer present during the mediation, also returns your iPod back to you, and it is in the same condition as before. The action plan formulated at the conclusion of the discussion acknowledged the apology provided and also entailed James’ doing 10 hours voluntary work in the community.

Please respond honestly to the following survey as though you are the victim of the offence.

Questions

1) Do you believe that the offender’s apology is sincere?

☐

Yes

☐

No

(Please tick one)

Why/why not? (Please indicate)

2) Do you accept the apology?

☐

Yes

☐

No

(Please tick one)

Why/why not? (Please indicate)

3) Do you forgive the offender?

☐ ☐ (Please tick one)

Yes No

Why/why not? (Please indicate)

Demographic Information

1) Please indicate your age range (Please circle)

18 - 40 years

41 - 60 years

61+ years

2) Please indicate your biological gender

(Please circle) Male Female

3) Please indicate whether you have been the victim of a theft-related crime

previously (Please circle) Yes No

Did you receive an apology from the offender?

(Please circle) Yes No

What were the consequences for you and the offender? (Please indicate)
