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Sincerity of apologies: do it right or don't do it at all

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to evaluate how a colleague's apology following a workplace offense affects victim's interpersonal motivations, focusing on the apology's perceived sincerity.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a between-subjects vignette design, the authors randomly assigned 604 participants to one of three scenarios: no offense, offense without apology and offense with apology. They assessed perceived sincerity and forgiveness, with forgiveness measured using the transgression-related interpersonal motivations scale, that is categorized in benevolence, revenge and avoidance.

Findings – Apologies significantly increase benevolence while reducing revenge and avoidance. However, sincerity is crucial for forgiveness: apologies perceived as insincere match the ineffectiveness of offering no apology, whereas apologies perceived as sincere notably enhance benevolence and decrease revenge, though they do not reduce avoidance when compared to scenarios without any offense.

Research limitations/implications – The study's methodology may affect its ecological validity and does not capture long-term motivational effects. Future research should explore these findings in real-world settings and consider longitudinal studies.

Practical implications – The findings suggest that managers, human resource professionals and other stakeholders should encourage genuine apologies to foster a forgiving and just workplace culture while preventing offensive behaviors.

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Originality/value – This research not only underscores the importance of sincerity in apologies but uniquely reveals the varying effects of offense and apology scenarios on distinct forgiveness motivations.

Keywords Transgression-related interpersonal motivations, Forgiveness, Apology sincerity, Workplace conflict, Interpersonal offenses

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Humans often engage in misconduct, for instance at work where colleagues regularly compete for resources and positions (Eisenkraft *et al.*, 2017). Such transgressions can invite conflicts among colleagues, harming an employee's motivation and well-being (Deng *et al.*, 2023; Jones, 2009) and causing organizational issues such as absenteeism, reduced productivity and poor team performance (for an overview, see Dirrler and Podruzsik, 2022). For instance, employees across different countries spend about 2.1 h a week dealing with workplace conflicts, amounting to 385 million working days lost annually in the USA alone (CPP Inc, 2008). Consequently, understanding how to prevent conflict escalation following an offense among colleagues is crucial for mitigating these negative effects.

One preventive approach involves actions from the offender that demonstrate repentance such as apologies: Research has consistently demonstrated that apologies play a crucial role in promoting forgiveness (e.g. Exline *et al.*, 2003; Dahiya, 2024; Ohtsubo and Higuchi, 2022). When perceived as sincere, apologies help to repair relationships by reducing negative emotions (Ebesu Hubbard *et al.*, 2013), lessening attributions of responsibility (Iwai and Carvalho, 2022) and rebuilding trust (Stackhouse *et al.*, 2024). In this manner, apologies can encourage forgiveness and reconciliation by enhancing benevolent motivations and diminishing vengeful or avoidant motivations toward the offender (Martinez-Diaz *et al.*, 2021; Radu *et al.*, 2019). Echoing this perspective, a recent article in the *Harvard Business Review* highlights just how important apologies and forgiveness are in the workplace (Bailey, 2023).

In the present study, we seek to investigate whether sincere apologies not only enhance benevolence but also diminish avoidance and revenge motivations toward colleagues. Due to their unique characteristics, workplace settings are particularly relevant for this research. Unlike in most other interpersonal contexts, organizational goals usually require colleagues to continue collaborating even after a transgression (Brady *et al.*, 2023). In addition, concern over potential long-term consequences in the professional context may suppress some reactions to an offense while encouraging others, leading to outcomes that differ from those in other personal relationships (Eaton and Struthers, 2006). Moreover, colleagues tend to hold equal status, reducing the influence of hierarchical power imbalances as potential confounding variables (Aquino *et al.*, 2001, 2006; Zheng *et al.*, 2016) and creating a more controlled context to examine how apologies influence interpersonal motivations such as benevolence, revenge and avoidance.

Regarding offenses among colleagues, some studies have already examined the association between an apology and forgiveness (Dahiya, 2024; Iwai and Carvalho, 2022; Ohtsubo and Higuchi, 2022). However, the impact of a sincere apology on revenge and avoidance motivations in the immediate workplace has received comparatively less attention in apology literature (Lai, 2014). Investigating this dynamic is crucial for identifying and mitigating potential sources of conflict before they escalate. Should resentment or social withdrawal persist after an apology, it could undermine productivity and pave the way for further disputes. Under such circumstances, the processes of apology and reconciliation would have to be carefully navigated and continually monitored to effectively contribute to the harmonization of work relationships and to ensure a productive working climate.

To bridge this gap and validate the initial findings further, the present study introduces an extended perspective by connecting the concept of sincere apologies with McCullough *et al.*'s (1998) interpersonal forgiveness framework within relationships at work, focusing specifically on interactions between colleagues. By situating this investigation within the workplace, we aim to provide insights into how conflict resolution processes unfold in professional environments and inform practices to enhance organizational harmony and collaboration.

Individual reactions to an interpersonal offense in the workplace

The interpersonal forgiveness model developed by McCullough *et al.* (1998) outlines how victims react to interpersonal offenses by highlighting three coping strategies for managing negative emotions and thoughts provoked by the offense (Aquino *et al.*, 2006): benevolence, revenge and avoidance.

Benevolence acts as a prosocial response contrasting with revenge and avoidance. Victims who display benevolence experience goodwill toward the offender, showing diminished desires for vengeance or avoidance, even after being wronged (McCullough *et al.*, 1998). This response is typically driven by empathy, compassion or a willingness to reconcile (Fehr *et al.*, 2010; Wenzel and Okimoto, 2010) and may be motivated by a wish to maintain the relationship (Donovan and Priester, 2020). Moreover, victims might also opt for a benevolent reaction as a way to alleviate distress and negative feelings when they are unable to express their anger through revenge or avoidance (Aquino *et al.*, 2006).

Revenge is characterized as the impulse to retaliate after being wronged (Jackson *et al.*, 2019). Those motivated by revenge seek to punish or harm the offender, typically driven by feelings of anger and a desire to restore a sense of justice (Grobbink *et al.*, 2015; Jackson *et al.*, 2019; Osgood, 2017). This response can take different forms, ranging from passive-aggressive actions to overt acts of retribution (Jackson *et al.*, 2019).

Avoidance involves the desire to distance oneself from the transgressor, either physically or emotionally, motivated by negatively experienced emotions such as anger, fear or shame (Barclay and Kiefer, 2014; Worthington and Wade, 1999). Avoidant responses may act as both a protective mechanism, assisting the victim in shielding themselves from further harm or distress, and as a type of revenge (Barnes *et al.*, 2009).

Determinants shaping responses to colleague misconduct

The actual response of a victim after an offense in terms of these three motivations is shaped by a range of contextual and psychological factors such as power dynamics (Zheng *et al.*, 2016), type of injustice (Jones, 2009), interindividual differences (Hodge *et al.*, 2019), time-related aspects (McCullough *et al.*, 2010), as well as feelings of guilt (Jordan *et al.*, 2015). While certain factors may affect how a victim views their potential response, for example, the perceived prospect of revenge, other aspects could influence the assessment of the offender or their actions.

The process of cognitive appraisal, wherein an individual evaluates certain characteristics and implications of a situation, is fundamental in shaping the victim's response to the offense (Fehr *et al.*, 2010; Tripp *et al.*, 2007). This evaluation involves various factors, including the perceived severity of the offense. When an individual perceives an offense as more *severe* – perhaps due to it causing significant harm or violating core values – they are more inclined to seek revenge or avoid the offender (Gerlsma and Lugtmeyer, 2016).

Likewise, forgiveness becomes more challenging when the transgressor is believed to have acted *intentionally* (Struthers *et al.*, 2008) and is thus deemed highly *responsible* (or to *blame*) for their actions (Martinez-Diaz *et al.*, 2021). However, the victim's perceived responsibility of the offender may decrease when the victim attributes the offensive behavior

internally. That is, how much the victim sees their own character or inherent traits as the reason for the offense (Hershcovis and Barling, 2010).

In addition, the *likability* of the offender and the perceived *similarity* of the victim and offender positively impact forgiveness cognitions (Kim *et al.*, 2008; Radu *et al.*, 2023). If the offender is perceived as more likable or has similar traits to the victim, it paves the way for a more empathic understanding of the situation and fosters a conducive environment for forgiveness.

These cognitive appraisals not only shape how victims perceive the offense but also influence their emotional reactions, which in turn guide their motivational responses (Tripp *et al.*, 2007). For instance, when victims feel that the offense was deeply unfair – perhaps because it was not only unprovoked but also targeted at their personal values or vulnerabilities, heightening its perceived severity – they are more likely to experience intense emotional reactions, such as moral outrage or anger (Bies and Tripp, 2005; Bondü *et al.*, 2022). In the wake of these emotions, specific motivations can arise: Victims may be driven to restore justice, seek payback against the offender or deter future harm to themselves or others. Consequently, these motivations may lead them to either retaliate against or distance themselves from the offender (Aquino *et al.*, 2006; Bondü *et al.*, 2022). Over time, victims may begin to develop benevolent motivations, as they gain a broader perspective and emotional distance, enabling them to reflect on the offense more objectively (McCullough *et al.*, 2003).

Taken together, the prior findings highlight the importance of understanding appraisal as a key determinant of post-offense responses. Consequently, we propose our first hypothesis:

H1. Benevolence motivations will be lower, and revenge and avoidance motivations will be higher after offensive behavior from a colleague compared to nonoffensive behavior.

If appraisal is one of the decisive factors shaping post-offense reactions, an important question emerges: How can this appraisal be influenced to foster more constructive outcomes? One potential answer lies in the role of apologies.

Apologies

An apology is an utterance that encompasses both taking responsibility for the harm done and expressing regret (Iwai and Carvalho, 2022; Kim *et al.*, 2004). It can include compensational offers, empathic expressions and an acknowledgement of violated norms (Carlisle *et al.*, 2012). Sometimes, it can also involve a specific request for forgiveness (Lewicki *et al.*, 2016). These aspects differentiate an apology from justifications, where actions are defended as appropriate, and excuses, where responsibility is minimized by citing lack of control (Montada and Kirchhoff, 2000).

Apologies play a crucial role in shaping post-transgression interpersonal motivations within workplace relationships, particularly in reducing avoidance and revenge motivations and facilitating forgiveness and reconciliation (Dahiya, 2024; Lai, 2014). While forgiveness is conceptualized as an internal process, involving the victim's deliberate effort to diminish negative emotions toward the transgressor (Goodstein and Aquino, 2010), reconciliation is conceptualized as an external response that involves extending acts of goodwill to repair relationships (Aquino *et al.*, 2001). Apologies create a pathway for empathy and understanding (Gold and Davis, 2005; Strang *et al.*, 2014), though, the mechanisms through which apologies operate are multifaceted.

One key lies in shifting the victim's perception of the offense (Wenzel and Okimoto, 2010). When colleagues apologize, they help reframe the victim's perception of the offense as less intentional or less controllable, reframing it as influenced by external circumstances (Takaku, 2001) and thereby reducing negative emotions (Ebesu Hubbard *et al.*, 2013) and blame attributions (Andiappan and Treviño, 2011). Acknowledging responsibility and

admitting the validity of the accusation can facilitate a shared understanding of the situation, serving as a foundation for the continuation of the relationship (Montada, 2018).

This reattribution process can narrow the perceived injustice gap by addressing perceptions of injustice and fostering a belief that justice is being restored, thereby reducing avoidant and vengeful motivations and increasing the likelihood of forgiveness (Aquino *et al.*, 2006; Exline *et al.*, 2003; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, certain apologies may carry an inherent costliness that can help to address the perceived imbalance of justice, as the offender demonstrates their commitment to making amends (Ohtsubo and Higuchi, 2022).

Additionally, an apology conveys that the transgressor, too, has been emotionally (e.g. guilt and shame, see Howell *et al.*, 2012) or psychologically (e.g. self-image threat, see Schumann, 2012) impacted by the offense (Davis and Gold, 2011). This acknowledgment can reassure the victim that the transgressor has recognized their fault, thereby reducing apprehension about repeated offenses. Thus, apologies may improve the victim's perception of the transgressor (Stackhouse *et al.*, 2024) by indicating that the transgressor feels guilty and has rehabilitated (Iwai *et al.*, 2023; Takaku, 2001).

While some apologies stem from a genuine feeling of remorse and a desire to mend the relationship, others are offered for instrumental reasons. They may function as a form of impression management, wherein the offender's acceptance of responsibility publicly reaffirms their moral character and accountability (Gold and Davis, 2005) or exhibits their professionalism in the workplace (Mu and Bobocel, 2019). As these traits signal the offender's trustworthiness and potential for positive change, victims are more inclined to forgive offenders who demonstrate positively evaluated personal characteristics (Carlisle *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, apologies may be made with the prospect of mitigating conflict, based on social expectations that apologies are typically accepted (Dhami, 2016; Mu and Bobocel, 2019). This may place pressure on the victim to accept the apology, or else put them at risk of being deemed responsible for maintaining the conflict (Dhami, 2016). Such pressure can create a gap between outwardly forgiving behavior and internal adverse feelings, which can obstruct sustainable conflict resolution.

If, however, an apology is able to not just simply acknowledge fault but also to actively and positively reshape perceptions of the offense, it can bridge the emotional gap between victim and offender, thereby creating an environment that is helpful in fostering forgiveness and future cooperation (Dahiya, 2024; Radu *et al.*, 2019). Building on these assumptions, we posit our second hypothesis:

H2. Benevolence motivations will be higher, and revenge and avoidance motivations will be lower after receiving an apology for offensive behavior from a colleague compared to offensive behavior without an apology.

The role of apology sincerity

Apologies can sometimes backfire, especially when they fail to meet the recipient's expectations (Duhnkrack and Troja, 2023). Furthermore, when apologies miss essential elements, such as acknowledging the perceived wrongdoing, taking responsibility, expressing regret, offering repair or assuring nonrepetition (Ebesu Hubbard *et al.*, 2013; Hatcher, 2010), they can appear insincere and thus be counterproductive. For an apology to have its intended effect, the apology needs to be perceived as *sincere* (Ayoko, 2016; Dahiya, 2024; Iwai and Carvalho, 2022). Figure 1 provides an overview of the essential components of a sincere apology. A genuine apology communicates remorse, acknowledges the harm caused and signals a willingness to change and to repair the relationship (Beesley, 2010; Pace *et al.*, 2010). For instance, Schmitt *et al.* (2010) demonstrated that asking for forgiveness

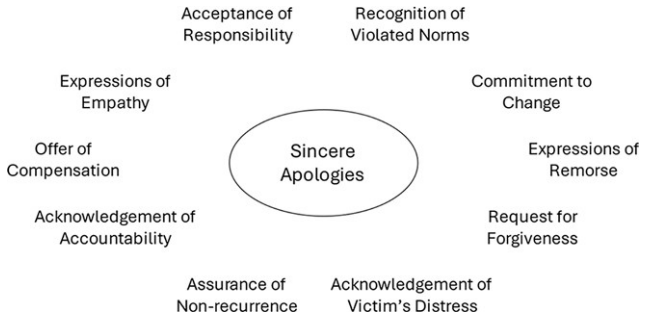

Figure 1. Components of a sincere apology
Source: Authors' own work

only led to forgiveness when it was combined with acknowledging the harm and offering compensation. Moreover, when accompanied by concrete attempts at restitution, victims are more likely to feel that the offender is committed to making amends, increasing the likelihood of forgiveness and reconciliation (Andiappan and Treviño, 2011; Jeter and Brannon, 2017), which are essential for collaboration and cooperation in professional settings.

To address this issue, we also explore the critical role of perceived sincerity, as prior research suggests that the effectiveness of an apology depends heavily on whether the victim perceives it as genuine (e.g. Andiappan and Treviño, 2011; Beesley, 2010; Hatcher, 2010). Specifically, we investigate the following exploratory hypothesis:

H3. Benevolence motivations will be higher, and revenge and avoidance motivations will be lower if the apology is perceived as sincere compared to when the apology is not perceived as sincere.

In summary, our study aims to investigate the effects of offensive behavior from a colleague on reducing benevolence and increasing revenge and avoidance motivations, and whether an apology can reverse these effects. Moreover, we examine the role of perceived sincerity in these dynamics.

Method

Ethics approval was obtained from the institutional review board at the [Ethics Committee of the University], and the study was preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF) to ensure transparency and replicability (see [URL to OSF]).

Study design

We used an experimental between-subjects vignette design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of three vignette conditions designed to manipulate their appraisal of a colleague's behavior. Participants were asked to imagine themselves in a workplace scenario competing for a promotion with a colleague. Upon returning from vacation, the colleague's level of assistance with accumulated tasks varied across scenarios. In scenario 1, a control condition depicting interpersonal justice, the colleague is helpful and supportive ("no offense" condition). In scenario 2, the colleague actively sabotages the work process without offering an apology ("offense without apology" condition). In scenario 3, the

colleague also sabotages the work but then extends an apology ("offense with apology" condition). The full texts of the vignettes can be found in the Appendix.

Vignette validation. The vignettes were developed to reflect realistic interpersonal interactions between colleagues and were subjected to a validation study with a convenience sample ($N = 107$). The validation assessed key dimensions such as the perceived offensiveness of the scenario, the sincerity of the apology and the levels of injustice. In the original version, outcomes of the colleague's behavior were included, specifically a promotion for the colleague and a demotion for oneself. However, we removed this aspect based on feedback from open-ended questions, which revealed that participants were overly focused on these consequences rather than on the actual behavior of the colleague. This adjustment ensured a clear and carefully designed vignette, tailored for the participants to evaluate and react specifically to the colleague's actions.

Sample

The study used a panel sample of 604 participants, distributed evenly across the three conditions. The sample was sourced through a European panel provider, using a German cohort. To ensure the relevance of the workplace scenarios, all participants were required to be currently employed and have at least one colleague. Additionally, to ensure data quality, we implemented data cleaning procedures, including attention and speeder checks, as well as monitoring for multiple participations through ID and extreme response tendencies. This approach aimed to provide ecological validity and insights into how offensive interactions influence dynamics between colleagues in the workplace. Sociodemographic details of the sample, including gender, age, educational level and job characteristics (team tenure and employment status), are summarized in Table 1.

Measured variables

Item- and factorial analyses were conducted within each condition, with Cronbach's alpha values calculated for each condition to assess internal reliability. Participants responded to all items using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*absolutely not true*) to 11 (*absolutely true*).

Transgression-related interpersonal motivations. In this study, forgiveness was operationalized according to McCullough *et al.*'s (1998, 2003) transgression-related

Table 1. Sociodemographic details of the sample in each condition

Condition	*N*	Gender (%)	Age *M* (*SD*)	Education level (%)	Team tenure *M* (SD)	Employment status (%)
No offense	202	Male: 50.5 Female: 49.5	43.97 (13.30) 18–68 years	Low: 27.2 Mid: 29.2 High: 43.6	8.46 (8.25) ≤ 10:71.8%	Fulltime: 62.9 Parttime: 31.7 Other: 5.5
Offense w/o apology	200	Male: 49.5 Female: 50.5	43.04 (13.58) 18–65 years	Low: 23.5 Mid: 28.5 High: 47.5	9.55 (9.07) ≤ 10:68.0%	Fulltime: 69.0 Parttime: 25.0 Other: 6.0
Offense w/ apology	202	Male: 51.5 Female: 48.0 Diverse: 0.5	43.05 (13.69) 18–67 years	Low: 28.2 Mid: 31.2 High: 40.6	8.11 (8.09) ≤ 10:70.8%	Fulltime: 61.4 Parttime: 32.2 Other: 6.5

Note(s): "Team tenure" refers to the years of being part of the current work team. Employment status "parttime" includes "parttime" and "minor employment"
Source(s): Authors' own work

interpersonal motivations (TRIM) scale, which is widely used (Brady *et al.*, 2023) and has also been validated in the German context (Morf *et al.*, 2025; Werner and Appel, 2004). This scale differentiates between three distinct transgression-related interpersonal motivational responses: benevolence, revenge and avoidance:

(1) *Benevolence* was measured with six items (e.g. "I have released my anger so I can work on restoring our relationship to health."): $\alpha_{\text{no-offense}} = 0.95$, $\alpha_{\text{offense}} = 0.94$, $\alpha_{\text{apology}} = 0.94$.

(2) *Revenge* was assessed with five original items (e.g. "I want to see him/her hurt and miserable."); however, the item "I want him/her to get what s/he deserves" was excluded due to a low factor loading, resulting in a revised scale of four items: $\alpha_{\text{no-offense}} = 0.94$, $\alpha_{\text{offense}} = 0.91$, $\alpha_{\text{apology}} = 0.93$.

(3) *Avoidance* was measured using seven items (e.g. "I live as if he/she doesn't exist."): $\alpha_{\text{no-offense}} = 0.95$, $\alpha_{\text{offense}} = 0.91$, $\alpha_{\text{apology}} = 0.92$.

The items used are available in English in the Appendix. In the original conceptualization by McCullough *et al.* (1998, 2003), as well as in several subsequent studies (e.g. Wenzel and Okimoto, 2014; Zheng *et al.*, 2016), forgiveness is operationalized as an index of these three dimensions. However, we follow Brady *et al.*'s (2023) recommendation to examine distinct responses instead of comprising those responses into one single forgiveness factor. This offers the ability to examine forgiveness as a multidimensional construct consisting of high benevolence and low revenge and avoidance.

Perceived sincerity. Perceived sincerity was measured using a single-item measure: "The colleague's apology seems sincere to me." This variable was only measured in the apology condition.

Manipulation check. A control variable was included to assess participants' ability to imagine themselves in the situation described in the vignettes. This was measured using the single-item question:

Q1. How well were you able to imagine yourself in this situation?

Participants responded on a scale from 1 (*very bad*) to 11 (*very well*). Descriptive statistics for this measure were as follows: nonoffense condition ($M = 7.73$, $SD = 2.72$, $Md = 8.00$), offense condition ($M = 8.34$, $SD = 2.58$, $Md = 9.00$) and apology condition ($M = 8.22$, $SD = 2.56$, $Md = 9.00$).

Data analysis

Data was analyzed using a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) to assess the effects of the independent variable (offense conditions) on the dependent variables (benevolence, revenge and avoidance), with the single-item manipulation check included as a covariate. Post hoc comparisons were conducted for the dependent variables using univariate ANOVAs with Bonferroni corrections to adjust for multiple testing and ensure robust statistical inferences. Furthermore, another exploratory MANCOVA analysis was conducted in which two apology groups were created based on sincerity perceptions (low vs high). These groups approximately represented the lowest 25% and highest 25% of the sample, following recommendations from the literature (Preacher *et al.*, 2005; see Results section for further details). This analysis aimed to investigate the impact of perceived apology sincerity on forgiveness outcomes. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Version 28.0.0.0.

Results

Descriptive statistics of the examined variables are provided in Table 2.

Main analysis of offense conditions and forgiveness outcomes

The results from the MANCOVA revealed a statistically significant variance between the offense conditions on the combined dependent variables, even after adjusting for engagement in the imagined task (serving as the manipulation check), with $F(6, 1196) = 31.744$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.138$ and Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.744$.

Furthermore, subsequent post hoc univariate ANOVAs showed statistically significant differences among the offense conditions in all three dimensions: *benevolence*, $F(2, 601) = 12.782$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.041$, *revenge*, $F(2, 601) = 20.111$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.063$ and *avoidance*, $F(2, 601) = 95.462$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.242$.

Regarding *H1*, which posits a difference in forgiveness outcomes between the no-offense condition and the offense without apology condition, post hoc analyses indicate significant differences ($p < 0.001$) in all three dimensions: *benevolence* is higher in the no-offense condition ($M_{Diff} = 1.23$, 95% CI[0.65, 1.81]), while both *revenge* ($M_{Diff} = -1.59$, 95% CI[-2.20, -0.99]), and *avoidance* ($M_{Diff} = -3.23$, 95% CI[-3.81, -2.64]) are higher in the offense without apology condition. These findings support *H1*.

As for *H2*, which concerns the difference in forgiveness outcomes between the offense without apology condition and the offense with apology condition, significant differences were noted in *benevolence* ($p = 0.020$, $M_{Diff} = -0.66$, 95% CI[-1.25, -0.08]), *revenge* ($p < 0.001$, $M_{Diff} = 0.92$, 95% CI[0.32, 1.52]) and *avoidance* ($p = 0.002$, $M_{Diff} = 0.82$, 95% CI[0.23, 1.40]). These results confirm *H2*.

In addition to our initial two hypotheses, we explored differences between the no-offense condition and the offense with apology condition. Post hoc analyses identified significant differences for *revenge* ($p = 0.023$, $M_{Diff} = -0.67$, 95% CI[-1.28, -0.07]), and *avoidance* ($p < 0.001$, $M_{Diff} = -2.41$, 95% CI[-2.99, -1.83]), but not for *benevolence* ($p = 0.059$, $M_{Diff} = 0.57$, 95% CI[-0.02, 1.15]). Results for both hypotheses and the exploratory analysis can be seen in Figure 2.

Exploratory analyses with sincerity groups

To explore the impact of low versus high perceived sincerity of an apology on forgiveness outcomes, we conducted an extreme groups comparison. For this purpose, from the offense with an apology group ($N = 202$), we formed two new apology groups based on perceived sincerity by identifying participants in the upper and lower percentiles, each encompassing ~25% of the sample (Preacher *et al.*, 2005). In total, 27.9% of the participants in the apology condition ($n_{low} = 56$) reported a perceived sincerity rating between 1 and 5 ($M_{low} = 3.27$,

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of forgiveness outcomes in each condition

		Benevolence		Revenge		Avoidance		Sincerity	
Condition	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
No offense	202	6.69	2.68	2.63	2.42	3.83	2.65		
Offense w/o apology	200	5.50	2.37	4.24	2.74	7.10	2.29		
Offense w/ apology	202	6.16	2.23	3.31	2.38	6.27	2.33	6.64	2.67
Low sincerity	56	4.71	2.20	4.08	2.74	7.72	2.09	3.27	1.60
High sincerity	56	7.56	2.14	2.87	2.40	5.12	2.41	9.77	0.81

Source(s): Authors' own work

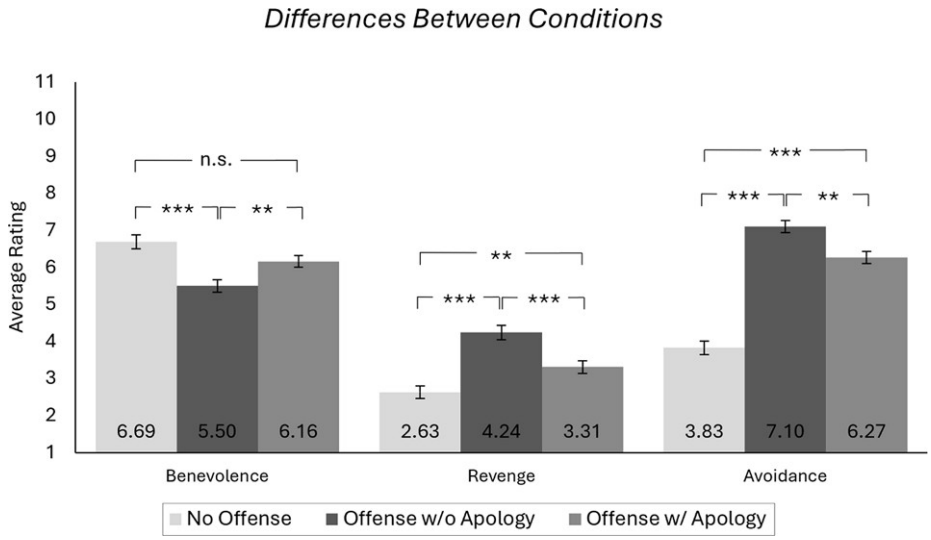

Figure 2. Mean comparisons of forgiveness outcomes in each condition

Note(s): Means, standard errors, and *p*-levels of mean comparisons. 1 = *absolutely not true*, 11 = *absolutely true*. ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *n.s.* = non-significant

Source: Authors' own work

$SD_{low} = 1.60$). Similarly, another 27.9% ($n_{high} = 56$) reported a sincerity rating between 9 and 11 ($M_{high} = 9.77$, $SD_{high} = 0.81$), thus creating two extreme groups of equal sample size. Subsequently, we used a MANCOVA to not only compare the outcomes between these two sincerity groups, but also to analyze the differences in outcomes with the no-offense group and the offense without an apology group. Means and standard deviations for the sincerity groups as well as the no-offense and the no-apology groups can be seen in Figure 3.

A one-way MANCOVA showed a statistically significant difference between the offense conditions on the combined dependent variables after controlling for engagement in the imagined task (manipulation check), $F(9, 1234.06) = 25.485$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.129$, Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.660$.

Post hoc univariate ANOVAs were conducted for every dependent variable. Results show statistically significant differences between the offense conditions for *benevolence*, $F(3, 509) = 20.196$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.106$, for *revenge*, $F(3, 509) = 14.763$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.080$ and for *avoidance*, $F(3, 509) = 75.171$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.307$.

The forgiveness outcomes within the two sincerity conditions showed significant variations from one another, as well as when compared to the no-offense and the offense without apology conditions.

As for our exploratory *H3*, we assume differences in forgiveness outcomes dependent on the perceived sincerity. There were significant differences between the low and high sincerity conditions. The low sincerity condition exhibited lower levels of *benevolence* ($p < 0.001$, $M_{Diff} = -2.79$, 95% CI[-4.03, -1.55]), and higher levels of both *revenge* ($p = 0.048$, $M_{Diff} = 1.31$, 95% CI[0.01, 2.61]), and *avoidance* ($p < 0.001$, $M_{Diff} = 2.75$, 95% CI[1.53, 3.97]). Therefore, *H3* is supported.

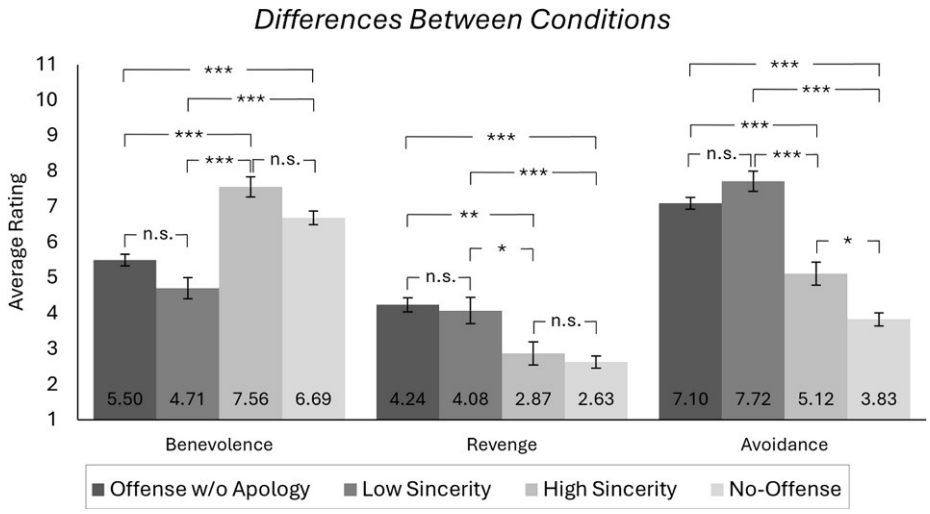

Figure 3. Mean comparisons of forgiveness outcomes in each condition with sincerity groups
Note(s): Means and standard errors. 1 = *absolutely not true*, 11 = *absolutely true*
Source: Authors' own work

In addition to this exploratory hypothesis, we investigated differences between the two sincerity conditions with the no-offense condition and the offense without apology condition.

In comparison with the no-offense condition, the low sincerity condition showed distinct outcomes in terms of *benevolence* ($p < 0.001$, $M_{Diff} = -1.98$, 95% CI[-2.97, -1.00]), *revenge* ($p < 0.001$, $M_{Diff} = 1.45$, 95% CI[0.42, 2.48]) and *avoidance* ($p < 0.001$, $M_{Diff} = 3.89$, 95% CI[2.93, 4.86]). In contrast, the no-offense condition did not differ from the high sincerity condition concerning *benevolence* ($p = 0.197$, $M_{Diff} = 0.80$, 95% CI[-0.56, 1.80]), and *revenge* ($p = 1.00$, $M_{Diff} = 0.14$, 95% CI[-0.91, 1.18]). However, there was a significant difference in *avoidance* ($p = 0.013$, $M_{Diff} = 1.14$, 95% CI[0.16, 2.12]).

When compared to the offense without apology condition, the low sincerity condition did not show significant differences in terms of *benevolence* ($p = 0.234$, $M_{Diff} = -0.77$, 95% CI[-1.76, 0.22]), *revenge* ($p = 1.00$, $M_{Diff} = -0.12$, 95% CI[-1.16, 0.91]) and *avoidance* ($p = 0.373$, $M_{Diff} = 0.68$, 95% CI[0.29, 1.67]). Conversely, the offense without apology condition exhibited significant disparities from the high sincerity condition for *benevolence* ($p < 0.001$, $M_{Diff} = 2.02$, 95% CI[1.03, 3.01]), *revenge* ($p = 0.002$, $M_{Diff} = -1.43$, 95% CI[-2.47, -0.39]) and *avoidance* ($p < 0.001$, $M_{Diff} = -2.07$, 95% CI[-3.04, -1.10]).

In summary, our findings support all hypotheses: Offensive behavior by a colleague reduces benevolence and heightens revenge and avoidance motivations. However, sincere apologies can reverse these effects, with insincere apologies making no significant difference. Notably, high sincerity apologies matched the benevolence and revenge levels of the no-offense condition.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how interpersonal offenses in the workplace, specifically the presence or absence of an apology, as well as its perceived sincerity influence individuals' forgiving responses. By using a between-subjects experimental design, we examined

benevolence, revenge and avoidance as dimensions of forgiveness, as conceptualized within McCullough *et al.*'s (1998) interpersonal forgiveness framework.

Our findings demonstrate that not only the presence of an apology but also its perceived sincerity play critical roles in shaping responses to offenses in the workplace. The presence of an apology significantly decreased revenge and avoidance motivations, while also increasing benevolent responses. When participants perceived the apology as sincere, they exhibited significantly lower motivations for avoidance and revenge and a higher propensity toward benevolence than in situations without an apology or with an apology perceived as insincere.

These results corroborate earlier research suggesting that experiences of unjust and offensive treatment lead to increased motivations for revenge and avoidance (Aquino *et al.*, 2006) and extend these insights to offenses among work colleagues. Moreover, our results underscore the efficacy of apologies in mitigating such negative reactions (Lai, 2014), aligning with previous studies that highlight the importance of apology sincerity for diminishing adverse responses and promoting forgiveness (e.g. Ayoko, 2016; Ebesu Hubbard *et al.*, 2013; Iwai and Carvalho, 2022; McCullough *et al.*, 1998). We build on this foundation by specifically exploring the impact of sincere apologies on the three distinct responses of avoidance, revenge and benevolence, thereby broadening the understanding of how apologies influence interpersonal dynamics in response to offenses in the immediate workplace.

Sincere apologies appear to activate psychological mechanisms that shift interpersonal dynamics from conflict to forgiveness. This underscores the importance of not just offering apologies but ensuring that they are perceived as sincere to maximize their effectiveness in addressing transgressions.

One noteworthy finding of this study is the lack of significant differences between low-sincerity apologies and the absence of an apology altogether. This implies that offering an insincere apology may not be more beneficial than not providing an apology. An apology perceived as insincere could even make the situation worse by being interpreted as a further offense, reinforcing negative perceptions (Struthers *et al.*, 2008). Future research should explore the psychological mechanisms behind this effect and examine how recipients distinguish between varying levels of sincerity in workplace apologies.

Furthermore, the results indicated no difference between high-sincerity apologies and the no-offense condition concerning benevolence and revenge. This finding suggests that sincere apologies have the potential to restore interpersonal relationships and to prevent the victim from seeking revenge against the transgressor. However, an important distinction emerged regarding avoidance motivations. While a sincere apology decreased the victim's desire to actively harm the offender and increased more benevolent emotions, it may not be sufficient to fully rebuild trust (Dahiya, 2024): The persistence of avoidance following a sincere apology may reflect a lingering sense of reluctance, caution or even suspicion, indicating impaired trust. This suggests that while apologies can initiate forgiveness and reconciliation, they do not compensate for the perceived violation of trust and are therefore not a miracle cure for interpersonal conflict. This is particularly important in professional contexts, where trust and reputation are integral to long-term collaboration.

Another point of discussion concerns the variability in perceptions of sincerity observed in our study. Despite efforts to include the essential components of an apology (Lewicki *et al.*, 2016), some participants perceived the apology as insincere. This may be for several reasons: First, existing norms related to workplace competitiveness among colleagues may influence how apologies are interpreted, with individuals perhaps viewing such gestures with criticism in a more competitive work environment. As Eaton and Struthers (2006)

demonstrated, work colleagues tend to apologize less often than friends or romantic partners. Second, when victims believe that the actions of the transgressor were deliberate, rather than incidental, moral indignation about the nature of the transgression increases, potentially leading to the perception of apology insincerity (Struthers *et al.*, 2008). Third, the repeated nature of negative behaviors in front of supervisors and colleagues, rather than isolated events, may have contributed to perceptions of insincerity, as colleagues may have viewed the apology as strategic and not as a genuine attempt of making amends. Finally, personality traits or specific contextual factors could also play a significant role in shaping perceptions of apologies (Bittner, 2024; Gimpl, 2024). These considerations emphasize the importance of both context and personal and interpersonal dynamics in how apologies are perceived at the workplace.

The observed dynamics between avoidance, revenge and forgiveness also warrant further exploration. For instance, the question arises whether avoidance might precede benevolence as part of a temporal process. For instance, Brady *et al.* (2023) and McCullough *et al.* (2003) suggested that different aspects of forgiving responses can vary in strength and dominance over time.

Implications for future research and limitations

This study provides valuable insights into how both the presence and perceived sincerity of an apology shape the victim's responses following a workplace offense. It introduces a novel perspective by connecting McCullough *et al.*'s (1998) interpersonal forgiveness framework with the concept of sincere apologies. Consistent with Brady *et al.* (2023) and findings from other prior research (Ma and Jiang, 2020; Martinez-Diaz *et al.*, 2021), our results support the notion that the three TRIM dimensions should be examined separately rather than aggregated into an index: The correlations among the three forgiveness outcomes vary considerably ($|0.06| \leq r \leq |0.68|$), which would not justify combining these dimensions into a single measure. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the distinct facets of forgiveness outcomes, acknowledging their individual contributions to the overarching concept of forgiveness. Moreover, the use of vignettes allowed for controlled manipulation of offense conditions, providing insights into how both the presence and perceived sincerity of apology requests shape these responses.

However, some limitations must be acknowledged that should be addressed in future studies. The first set of limitations pertains to the measurement of apology sincerity. Using a single item may not fully capture the complexity of this construct and might lead to biases if participants misunderstood the wording of the item. To address this issue, future research should consider incorporating multi-item and multidimensional measures. These quantitative measures could be complemented by qualitative interviews to explore individual perceptions of an apology's sincerity and the subjective relevance of its various components, such as emotional expression, acknowledgment of harm and offers of restitution (Lewicki *et al.*, 2016).

Another limitation regarding sincerity concerns is the operationalization of low sincerity. Due to the nonnormal distribution of data, we created a low-sincerity group comprising scale values from 1 to 5, which included individuals with low to moderate levels of perceived sincerity. To achieve greater variance in perceived sincerity and to more effectively examine the differential effects of, for example, no apologies versus insincere apologies, future research should consider adding a vignette specifically designed to portray a low-sincerity apology.

Second, the study's reliance on vignettes, while methodologically advantageous and allowing for controlled manipulation of the offense conditions, potentially has implications

for its ecological validity and therefore the generalizability of the results. Prior research (McCullough and Hoyt, 2002) suggests that forgiveness responses might differ in real-life contexts compared to fictional or historical transgressions. To counteract this potentially confounding aspect, we performed a manipulation check by asking participants how well they could empathize with the vignette. Future research should replicate these findings in additional real-world settings to better understand how individuals respond to apologies in actual workplace conflicts.

Moreover, while the vignettes include some description of nonverbal behavior during the transgression, the apology section lacks these details. Given that nonverbal and paraverbal elements can influence the perception of an apology (e.g. Hornsey *et al.*, 2020; Marler *et al.*, 2011), future research could consider incorporating these components. However, it should be noted that vignettes may not be ideally suited for this purpose, as they may not fully capture the visual-perceptual nature of these elements.

Third, another avenue for future research involves examining the longer-term temporal dynamics of offenses, apology and forgiveness in the workplace. Specifically, exploring how avoidance, revenge and benevolence evolve over time and interact with one another could shed light on the processes underlying workplace conflict resolution (McCullough *et al.*, 2003, 2010).

Finally, future research should investigate variations in forgiveness responses by considering the severity and context of transgressions, which would contribute to a broader generalizability of these findings. Examining possible moderating factors, such as interindividual differences in forgiveness (e.g. Hodge *et al.*, 2019), could provide better insights into how personal characteristics shape responses in workplace transgressions. Furthermore, Schumann *et al.* (2023) highlighted the importance of the general frequency and history of apologizing as moderators in how individuals are perceived, suggesting the baseline frequency of apologies may influence the effectiveness of subsequent apologies. Investigating these aspects would offer a more differentiated understanding of the role of apologies across various settings.

Practical implications

The findings of this study have significant practical implications for conflict management in workplace settings. By specifically focusing on interactions between workplace colleagues, where both parties may or may not hold equal status and power, we can provide insights into how conflict resolution processes unfold in professional environments and inform practices to enhance organizational harmony and collaboration. Managers, consultants, mediators and human resource staff can play a crucial role in fostering an environment that encourages sincere apologies from transgressors. By encouraging employees to reflect on their actions and potential wrongdoings, these stakeholders can help mitigate avoidance and revenge responses and create a foundation for forgiveness and future collaboration. In cases where a sincere apology may not be possible, these third parties can guide individuals toward alternative forms of reparative actions and support the process of repairing and restoring trust in the relationship. Additionally, these third parties should also remain attentive to the victims following an apology, as a lingering avoidance or mistrust may persist. By recognizing these lingering effects, they can implement supportive measures that help rebuild trust. Furthermore, the organizational leadership should equally model this behavior by acknowledging their own mistakes and showing sincere efforts to make amends. In turn, this contributes to a more positive workplace climate, in which individuals feel safe to admit wrongdoings and engage in repairing relationships and rebuilding trust.

Organizations might also benefit from cultivating a culture that values forgiveness and emphasizes the importance of sincere apologies. Developing a more just and forgiving work climate could involve training programs (Toussaint *et al.*, 2019), conflict resolution workshops and policies that encourage open communication and accountability as well as help employees understand the value of sincere and effective apologies. In addition to addressing already occurred transgressions effectively, efforts should also focus on preventing transgressions in the first place by fostering an understanding of the impact of transgressions, working on more effective communication and defining a clear code of conduct. Such initiatives could enhance interpersonal trust and improve team dynamics, ultimately contributing to a healthier and more collaborative and productive workplace environment.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the transformative potential of apologies – particularly when perceived as sincere – in mitigating negative interpersonal dynamics and fostering reconciliation in workplace relationships. By addressing the different dimensions of transgressions, sincere apologies serve as a crucial mechanism for reducing avoidance and revenge motivations while promoting forgiveness and cooperation. Given that insincere apologies fail to produce positive outcomes, these findings underscore the importance of authentic and genuine restoration efforts.

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Appendix. Transgression-related interpersonal motivations (TRIM; McCullough *et al.*, 1998, 2003)

Avoidance

I am trying to keep as much distance between us as possible.
I am living as if he/she doesn't exist, isn't around.
I don't trust him/her.
I am finding it difficult to act warmly toward him/her.
I am avoiding him/her.
I cut off the relationship with him/her.
I withdraw from him/her.

Revenge

I'll make him/her pay.
I wish that something bad would happen to him/her.
I want him/her to get what he/she deserves.
I'm going to get even.
I want to see him/her hurt and miserable.

Benevolence

Even though his/her actions hurt me, I have goodwill for him/her.
I want us to bury the hatchet and move forward with our relationship.
Despite what he/she did, I want us to have a positive relationship again.
I have given up my hurt and resentment.
Although he/she hurt me, I put the hurts aside so we could resume our relationship.
I have released my anger so I could work on restoring our relationship to health.

Vignettes

Imagine experiencing the following situation at work. Please read the described situation carefully and try to put yourself in it.

Background

Recently, your supervisor informed all team members that due to restructuring measures, someone from the team would have to move to a less attractive position. At the same time, in the next two months, a position held by a long-standing colleague will become vacant as they retire. This position would mean a promotion within the company for you, and you are very interested in it. However, you know that a coworker is also interested in the position. In terms of job performance, there are no noticeable differences between you both, and you are both highly committed. So far, you believe you have always worked well together, and you have never heard this coworker speak ill of you. In the last week of March, you have to take time off to avoid losing your remaining vacation days. Upon returning, you quickly realize that many tasks have accumulated in your absence, and you lack some information needed for thorough processing.

1. Justice condition (control group)

When you ask the coworker competing for the same position for help, they are very supportive. They proactively approach you, answer your questions, and provide all the information you need for the task. Moreover, they want to sit down with you soon to discuss the processing of a specific task. This is necessary because, in the following week, all team members must present their current progress on the task in a team meeting before the supervisor. At this team meeting a week later, everything goes smoothly, and you are very satisfied with your contribution.

2. Injustice conditions with and without apology

When you ask your competitor for help, they respond that they do not have the capacity to compensate for your ignorance and lack of independence. They blame you for choosing to go on vacation during such a busy work period. However, both of you also know that no one else from the team could assist you. At the team meeting a week later, the supervisor asks all team members to present their current status on a specific task. To your surprise, everyone has prepared something. When it's your turn, you unfortunately have nothing to show because you have not managed to engage with the task after your vacation. When it's your competitor's turn, they say, "I took it upon myself to cover both my tasks and those of my colleague, who preferred to go on vacation rather than handle pressing issues," pointing at you accusatorily. Your supervisor and teammates are surprised that you were not informed about the upcoming task by your colleague.

Additional content for the apology condition. A little while after the team meeting, there's a knock on your door. Your coworker comes in and says:" I want to apologize. I realize now that I acted wrongly since you came back from vacation. It was my fault how things went in the team meeting and that you were left with a bad impression in front of our supervisor and the entire team. I should have helped you and informed you about the upcoming task. I hoped to gain an advantage in the race for the vacant position because I desperately need the extra salary at home. I'm truly sorry, and I hope you can forgive me."

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