

Chapter 9

WHO MUST DECIDE TO MAKE THE FIRST MOVE AND APOLOGIZE FOLLOWING AN INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT?

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Abstract

Complex situations in which an aggressive act had been committed, and the victim had reacted in a way that was out of proportion with the severity of the offense were examined. Who, in these conditions, must decide to make the first move and to offer apologies? Participants were 198 adolescents and adults aged 15 to 85. Vignettes describing a situation in which one person was threatened and more or less violently reacted to the aggression were used. An asymmetry in responses was evidenced. When the aggressors comparatively suffered least, the participants designated them as the ones who were expected to make the first move. However, when the aggressors comparatively suffered most, there was considerable uncertainty as to designating who was expected to make the first move. These not uncommon situations appear to be among the most intractable decision-making ones, even when the level of the severity of the consequences is relatively minor.

Key-words: Aggression, reaction, apologies

INTRODUCTION

On the personal, family, community, national and international level, the quality of our relationships with others is largely determined by the decisions to apologize or not apologize that we make regarding the persons or the groups we have, intentionally or unintentionally,

severely or slightly, durably or temporarily hurt. Our attitude toward apologies may have important repercussions on the way we behave in the family (e.g., family violence, parenting practices), on the way we conceive of the functioning of institutions (e.g., the educational system, the justice system), and on the way we consider certain major international events (e.g., amnesty commissions).

According to Goffman (1967), an appropriate apology consists of seven elements: (a) the expression of concern for the victim's suffering, (b) the acknowledgment of the rule being violated, (c) the approval of sanctions, (d) the non-approval of one's own behavior, (e) the dissociation from the misdeed, (f) the affirmation of obeying the rule in the future, and (g) the offer of compensation for the deed. This author stated that "an apology (and hence also a confession) is a gesture through which the individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the deceit and affirms a belief in the offended rule" (1971, p. 113).

Scher and Darley (1997) have identified four apology strategies that affect perceptions of the transgressor and the effectiveness of the apology: remorse (an expression of sadness about the transgression), responsibility (an admission of fault), forbearance (a promise to avoid the transgression in the future), and reparation (an offer to correct the transgression). Itoi, Ohbuchi, & Fukuno (1996) clearly separated apology from other form of accounts: denial, justification, and excuse. In denial, one rejects the association with the negative event. In justification, one acknowledges the association but asserts that the event was not negative and the act was justifiable. In excuse, one acknowledges the association with the event and its harmfulness but asserts that there were other causal agents. By contrast, in apology, one acknowledges all of them (see also Regehr and Gutheil, 2002).

Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Förster and Montada (2004) examined the relationship that people consider between these diverse components of apologies. They showed that (a) persons who ask for forgiveness and offer compensation are, to a certain extent, supposed to have admitted fault, (b) persons who admit fault and offer compensation are, to a certain extent, supposed to have admitted damage, (c) persons who have admitted fault are, to a certain extent, supposed to have expressed remorse.

Apologies as an Expected Social Interchange for Conflict Resolution

Gonzales, Haugen, Manning & Wetter (1990) instructed their US participants to believe that they had committed an accidental offense with either mild or severe consequences for a confederate victim, and to provide written accounts after their victims' reproach. Mitigating accounts, especially apologies were professed much more often than aggravative accounts. In a follow up study, Gonzales, Manning & Haugen (1992) instructed their participants to imagine themselves as the offending party in a predicament. They showed that concessionary strategies were still more prevalent when the offenses were more blameworthy (see also Hodgins, Liebeskind & Schwartz, 1996).

Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas (1991) conducted a series of studies on confession and apology using typical scenarios and one laboratory offense. When responding to vignettes, US participants evaluated an offender more favorably, and were more likely to make external attributions for an offender's actions following a confession (which included an apology, contrition, self-blame, and reparation for the offense), especially when made

spontaneously, compared to when the offender denied responsibility for an offense. Gold and Weiner (2000) replicated these findings. They suggested that whether someone shows remorse or not has a powerful effect on social judgments when a rule is broken and a confession is made. When remorse is shown, transgressors are judged more favorably than when it is not exhibited. According to these authors, apologies and confession are effective because it seems that people care very much about whether the action will be repeated or not.

Ohbuchi and Sato (1994) presented Japanese fifth graders with vignettes in which a male harmdoer was described as either intentionally or unintentionally harming another boy and was further described as giving apologies, excuses, or no account following the act. The children perceived the harmdoer who decided to apologize as less intentional and more remorseful, and evaluated him as morally less negative than the other boys (excuses or no account). Itoi, Ohbuchi & Fukuno (1996) and Sugimoto (1997) showed that Japanese and US students showed preference for mitigating accounts (apologies), especially when the harm done was severe. Ohbuchi (1999) conjectured that there are universal psychological processes for account selection and people have culturally common knowledge of social functions of accounts.

Ohbuchi, Suzuki, and Takaku (2001) showed, however, that apology was not the offender's preferred account in the case where there was a demand for compensation on the part of the victim and there was no way to mitigate one's responsibility. In the same vein, Takaku (2000) showed that the victim's-offender status difference can alter offenders' preference for accounts. When the victim's status is lower, excuses are preferred to apologies.

Bennet and Dewberry (1994), in a series of studies to determine the effects of various types of apologies on their recipients found that US people might feel constrained to accept an apology even if they would rather not and even if the apology is weak. Furthermore people have better opinions of those who accepted apologies than of those who did not (see also Bennet & Earwalker, 1994). Risen and Gilovich (2007) showed that victims tend not to differentiate between sincere apologies and coerced apologies, although this distinction was easy to realize from outside. They explained this phenomenon by invoking the fact that the victims are motivated to feel good, to be seen in a positive light by others and that the apologies-forgiveness script is a powerful one in our societies.

Although Expected, Apologies May Not Be That Frequent

Zechmeister, and Romero (2002) had their participants write two narratives that described an incident in which they angered or hurt someone or in which someone angered or hurt them. Offender's apology and attempt to make amends were present in less than one-fifth of the narratives, irrespective of the condition (victim versus offender). Exline, Deshea and Holeman (2007) had participants report two situations in which they have hurt someone else, one in which apologies were offered and one in which they were not. They showed that in situations in which apologies were offered, pre-offense relationship closeness was higher, intentionality of the act was lower, remorse was higher, forgiveness and reconciliation were higher, and regret about the decision (to apologize or not) was lower.

Apology Reduces Victim's Anger and Subsequent Aggression

Ohbuchi, Kameda and Agarie (1989) have shown that apology mediates victims' aggression and revenge-taking. In two separate studies, (a) Japanese female students were psychologically harmed and then received an apology by another female student, and (b) Japanese male students were instructed to play the role of a victim in a hypothetical harm situation. In each case, when the offenders decided to apologize, the victims refrained from severe aggression against them, which was not the case when the offender did not apologize. The victim's aggressive reaction was mediated by impression improvement, emotional mitigation, and reduction in the desire for an apology. It also depended on the severity of the harm.

In Baron's (1990) study, US participants were instructed to perform a difficult task. Their performance was subsequently criticized in a very harsh, unfair way par an expert (an accomplice of the experimenter). These angry participants were then exposed to four types of interventions likely to produce a change in their current mood: an apology from the evaluator for having been so harsh, or an explanation that the evaluator's behavior was attributable to external causes, or the provision of a book of comics, or the possibility to express anger in a cathartic way. The apology condition was the one that most reduced anger and preserved the willingness to collaborate in the future with the expert. Reading comics had no effect, and catharsis had a negative effect.

Anderson, Linden & Habra (2006) have measured cardiovascular reactions of people who have been hurt. They have shown that, after having being hurt, hostile persons recovered from anger more quickly if they have been offered a true apology than if they have been offered a fake apology or no apology at all.

Apology Reduces Offender's Punishment and Promote Empathy and Forgiveness in the Victim

Rumsey (1976) gave mock jurors a trial transcript in which an intoxicated driver hit and kill a pedestrian. When the defendant expressed remorse, he received a shorter prison sentence than when he did not express remorse. Robinson, Smith-Lovin, and Tsoudis (1994) have their participants (students) respond to mock criminal confessions by drivers responsible for vehicular manslaughter who, as in Rumsey's study, either appeared to be remorseful or showed no sign of remorse. Displays of remorse have an indirect effect on severity of sentence trough impact on identity assessment (how likely is it that he will continue to engage in the behavior he spoke about?). Kleinke, Wallis and Stalder (2001) showed that the recommended prison sentence by the participants for a rapist correlates significantly with participants' perception of the rapist's remorse. Bornstein, Rung and Miller (2002) showed, however, that when physician-defendant expressed remorse at the time of the incident they were condemned to compensate the patient-plaintiff to a higher degree than when the expressed remorse at trial, or never expressed remorse. They interpreted their findings by invoking the fact that expressing remorse at this time was an indication of responsibility/culpability.

Darby and Schlenker (1982) examined the effect of apologies on blame and punishment among children aged 6, 9, and 12. In one of their experiments the participants were presented

with vignettes depicting a central character, Pat, who, while playing, caused another child to be knocked to the ground, and apparently to be hurt. Pat's intentionality for the incident, Pat's motives, and Pat's response to the incident were systematically varied. Pat was described either as (a) simply walking away after the incident, without saying or doing anything, (b) simply saying "Excuse me", (c) saying "I am sorry, I feel badly about this", or (d) saying "I am sorry, I feel badly about this. Please let me help you". More elaborate apologies caused Pat to be blamed less and forgiven more. The apologies effect was, however, much more pronounced in 12-year-olds than in younger children.

Girard and Mullet (1997) compared the impact of apology on willingness to forgive with the impact of other circumstances surrounding a harmful situation (e.g., the degree of proximity to the target of forgiveness, the intent of the act, the degree of cancellation of consequences. Out of the six factors they considered, the apology factor ranked third, by the cancellation factor and the intent factor. In addition, it was found that the many factors compensate the one for the other; that is, a high level of the apology factor may compensate for a high level of the intent factor or a low level of the cancellation of consequences factor. These results were later replicated in Girard, Mullet and Callahan (2002) among another sample of French adults, in Azar and Mullet (2001) among six different samples from the largest religious communities in Lebanon, and in Ahmed, Azar and Mullet (2007) among a sample of Kuwaiti adolescents and adults. In all these studies, the apology factor was shown to be one of the most important factors determining willingness to forgive.

McCullough, Worthington and Rachal (1997) instructed their US participants to recall recent episodes in their life in which someone hurt them, and complete a set of measurements related to these episodes: severity of the harm, presence of apologies, level of empathy for the transgressor, and level of forgiveness. They showed a strong relationship between the presence of apologies and forgiveness. They also showed that the link between apologies and forgiveness was to a large extent mediated by the recovering of empathy towards the transgressor (see also McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown & High, 1998).

Eaton and Struthers (2006) tested a model in which repentance was linked to forgiveness and subsequent revengeful aggression. They showed a positive link between repentance and forgiveness in each of the three contexts examined: harmful behavior by a coworker, a friend or a romantic partner. The relationship between repentance and revenge was totally mediated by forgiveness. Eaton, Struthers and Santelli (2006), subsequently showed that repentance leads to decreased unforgiveness through victim's perceptual validation (social verification that one is correct about one's interpretation of the harmful event). May and Jones (2007) showed, in a two-month long longitudinal study, that victim's forgiveness was predicted by the presence of a sincere apology from the offender.

Finally, Allan, Allan, Kaminer and Stein (2006) examined the association between forgiveness and four restorative situations (excuses, admission of guilt, apology and true remorse) in a group of victims of gross human rights violations who were potential or actual participants of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They showed that forgiveness was higher among victims who perceived wrongdoers as truly sorry.

Type of Aggression, Perspective-Taking, Appropriate Timing, and Perceived Sincerity Matter

Gauché and Mullet (2008) examined whether the effect of the offender's decision to apologize on the victim's willingness to forgive depended on the type of aggressive behavior. Their participants were presented with vignettes depicting an offense and they expressed willingness to forgive in three contexts: breaking of love, gossiping at work and collision during a game. Apologies had more impact in the physical aggression condition than in the psychological aggression conditions (see also Gauché & Mullet, 2005). In addition, in the breaking of love condition, the effect of apologies depended on the current level of the cancellation of consequences factor. In the case of full cancellation (*status quo ante*), the effect apologies was considerably stronger than in the case of no cancellation.

Takaku, Weiner and Ohbuchi (2001) and Takaku (2001) showed that the acceptance of an apology can be impacted by the victim's perspective taking ability. Participants were more willing to accept an apology when reminded of a situation in which they themselves have harmed somebody else. Mitchell (1989) showed that the timing and the delivery of the apology contributed to its effectiveness in healing a relationship. McPherson Frantz and Beningson (2005) showed that victims who received apologies later in a conflict feel more satisfied with the resolution of the conflict than victims who received apologies immediately after the offense because they feel that have had more opportunity for self-expression and they feel better understood.

Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero and Vas (2004) showed that an "apology" may lead to retaliation when the victim places greater blame on the offender who admits a wrong. A false apology without any effort to make amends may decrease the likelihood of victim's forgiveness, particularly if an offense is associated with high arousal. Hareli and Eisikovits (2006) showed that the knowledge that apology was motivated by guilt or shame increased the victim's willingness to forgive. The knowledge that apology was motivated by pity decreased the victim's willingness to forgive.

De Cremer and Schouten (2008) showed that, at work, apologies are more effective when they are communicated by a supervisor being respectful to her employees. They showed that the effect of apologies on fairness perception was mediated by self-evaluations in terms of relational appreciation. Thomas, White and Sutton (2008) showed that, following sexual abuse on a member of their religious community, women were more forgiving of a male pastor who did not apologize, and men were more forgiving of a female pastor who did not apologize. They concluded that in these conditions, apologies seem to represent weakness. Finally, Santelli, Struthers and Eaton (2009) showed that the motivational content of an apology may influence the extent of which this apology is effective in eliciting forgiveness. A regulatory fit or mismatch between victims and repentant transgressors can influence forgiveness.

The Present Study

In most experimental studies examining the effectiveness of apologies or examining the victims' willingness to forgive after receiving an apology, the situations that are depicted are usually simple ones, involving a clearly defined aggressor, a clearly defined victim, and one

single, one-shot offense or set of offenses (e.g., Bornstein, Rung and Miller, 2002). In these situations, the aggressor is typically presented as having harmed a known or an unknown victim. The participants are instructed to identify with the aggressor or with the victim and to judge the extent to which they would decide to apologize or to accept apologies, and consider forgiveness, revenge or justice as options under these circumstances.

In daily life, however, the situations in which an aggressive act has been committed are often very complex, dynamic ones (see Zechmeister, and Romero, 2002). In particular, victims do not always remain passive. They often react to the aggression, and sometimes, they react in a way that is out of proportion with the severity of the initiating event. When it is the case, there is considerable uncertainty as to whom (the aggressor or the “victim”) is expected to apologize first. These types of situations are not that uncommon in daily life. It is understandable why, owing to this considerable uncertainty, they also appear as among the most intractable decision-making situations as for finding a satisfactory resolution.

Although they are frequently evoked in the literature, this type of situation has never been empirically investigated. The present study was aimed at examining such situations from the perspective of ‘deciding to make the first move’; that is, of ‘deciding to apologize first’ as a means for de-escalating the conflict. Daily life teaches us that, in general, the person who first acted in a harmful way is the one who is expected to apologize first. However, in some cases, the victim of such acts may be expected to ease the process, especially when he/she reacted in a disproportionate way or, possibly, when he/she was considerably younger than the offender. In some extreme cases, it may be the victim who feels morally forced to make the first move.

In the present study six factors likely to impact on the expectations of making the first move by lay participants have been explored: (a) the severity of the consequences of the aggression, (b) the severity of the consequences of the reaction, (c) the durability of the consequences of the aggression, (d) the durability of the consequences of the reaction, (e) the aggressor’s age (in relation to the victim - younger or older), and (f) the aggressor’s gender.

The first hypothesis was that, under most circumstances, it is the person who committed the aggression who is expected to make the first move, that is, to apologize first (Goffman, 1967). The second hypothesis was that the more the consequences of the aggression are severe and durable, the more the aggressor is expected to make the first move (Girard & Mullet, 1997; Girard, Mullet & Callahan, 2002; Gonzales, Manning & Haugen, 1992; Itoi, Ohbuchi & Fukuno, 1996). The third hypothesis was that the more the consequences of the reaction are severe and durable, the less the aggressor was expected to make the first move. The fourth hypothesis was that the older the person who committed the first aggressive act (in relation to the victim), the less the aggressor was expected to make the first move. This hypothesis was derived from findings showing that differential status may matter at the time of offering accounts (e.g., Takaku, 2000).

In addition to these five hypotheses, we also had several research questions. The first question regarded the possible effect of the aggressor’s gender. Is the aggressor’s gender a relevant cue for judging who is expected to apologize first? The second research question regarded the possible effect of the participants’ gender and the possible interactions between each factor and the participants’ gender. To what extent do males and females differ in their expectation that the aggressor should apologize first? Do males and females weigh the five factors in the same way? The third research question regarded the possible effect of the participants’ age and the interactions between each factor and the participants’ age. To what

extent do young adults and elderly persons differ in their expectation that the aggressor should apologize first? Do younger and older adults weigh the five factors in the same way?

METHOD

The methodological framework of the present study was the Functional Theory of Cognition (Anderson, 2008). This framework had already been used by Girard and Mullet (1997) and Girard, Mullet and Callahan (2002) in their studies comparing the relative importance of apology and other circumstances, and by Gauché and Mullet (2005, 2008) in their studies on the effect of the character of the act on willingness to forgive.

Participants

The participants were all unpaid volunteers, contacted in the streets of Toulouse (a large town in southwestern France) or on the campus of Toulouse University. The participation rate was 66%. The final sample comprised 198 French adults aged 15 to 85 years ($M=35.1$; $SD=18.15$), including 80 men and 118 women. The participants were classified in four age groups: 15-20 year-olds ($N=53$), 21-30 year-olds ($N=45$), 31-49 year-olds ($N=53$), and 50+ year-olds ($N=47$). The most common reason given by people who refused to participate was that they had no free time at the moment they were requested to participate. All participants gave an informed consent.

Material

The test material was made up of 64 vignettes describing a situation in which one person was threatened by another person, and more or less violently reacted to the aggression. In each vignette, six pieces of information were provided: aggressor's gender, aggressor's age (older or younger than the victim), the severity of the consequences of the aggression (severe or not very severe), (b) the severity of the consequences of the reaction (severe or not very severe), (c) whether the victim was still suffering from the consequences of the aggression, and (e) whether the aggressor was still suffering from the consequences of the reaction. The age (40 years-old) and gender of the victim (male) were kept constant.

A sample vignette was the following: "Julius and Bernard live in the same neighborhood. In the past, they have shared some recreational activities. Julius is 25-years old. Bernard is 40-years old. Julius has, deliberately, committed a harmful act against Bernard. The consequences of the harm have been very severe. In reaction, Bernard has committed a harmful act against Julius. The consequences of this act have, however, been minor. Today, the consequences of the harm on Bernard are still present but the consequences of the harm on Julius have disappeared. In your view, who of these two persons should make the first move and decide to apologize for the harm done?"

A completely opposite situation is depicted in the following example: "Christie and Daniel live in the same neighborhood. In the past, they have shared some recreational

activities. Christie is 55-years old. Daniel is 40-years old. Christie has, deliberately, committed a harmful act against Daniel. The consequences of the harm have, however, been minor. In reaction, Daniel has committed a harmful act against Christie. The consequences of this act have been, by contrast, very severe. Today, the consequences of the harm on Daniel have disappeared, but the consequences of the harm on Christie are still present.” Each scenario was printed on a separate sheet of paper. Under each scenario was a large 23-step response scale with “Christie” (the aggressor’s name) on the left and “Daniel” (the victim’s name) on the right.

Procedure

Each participant responded individually, usually in his/her home or in a quiet room at the university. As recommended by Anderson (1982), each participant went through a familiarization phase, during which he/she was given explanations by the experimenter. Here, the participant was asked to read a certain number of scenarios in which a person committed an aggression involving serious consequences for another person who more or less violently retaliated some time later. The participant was then asked to express which of the two people should decide to make the first move. Each participant was presented with series of 32 scenarios taken randomly from the 64 total, shown one by one in random order. Each scenario was read aloud by the participant, following which, the experimenter reminded the participant of the items of information it contained. Participants then provided the requested ratings. After the completion of the 32 ratings, the participant was allowed to compare his or her responses and modify them if needed.

During the following experimental phase, the 64 scenarios were presented (in a different order for each participant). Each participant provided his/her ratings at his/her own pace. In this phase, it was no longer possible to compare responses or to go back and make changes as in the familiarization phase.

RESULTS

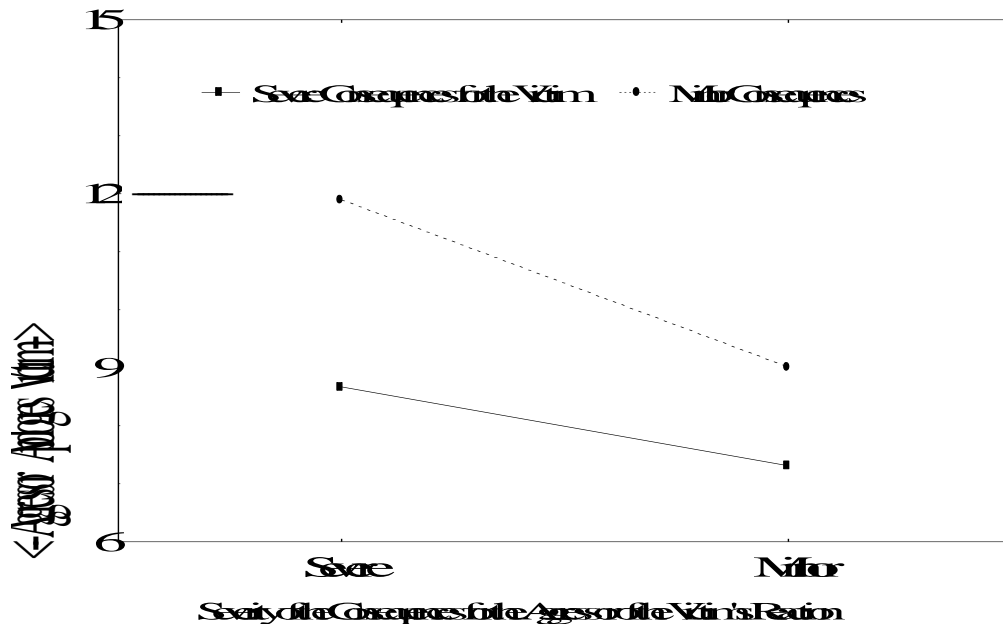
The participants took, on average, approximately 40 minutes to complete the experiment. Each rating by each participant in the experimental phase was converted to a numerical value (1-23). These numerical values were then subjected to graphical and statistical analyses. The lowest mean (5.84) was reasonably far from the minimum (1), which suggests that there was no floor effect to complicate the interpretation of the results.

The overall mean value was 9.23 ($SD=6.30$); that is, much closer to the left side of the response scale (the aggressor must decide to do the first step) than to the right side of the response scale (the victim must decide to do the first step). This value was also significantly different from 12, the central value of the response scale, $p < .001$.

An ANOVA was performed with a design of participant’s Gender x participant’s Age (four levels) x Aggressor’s gender x Aggressor’s age x Severity of the consequences of the aggression x Severity of the consequences of the reaction x Durability of the consequences of the aggression x Durability of the consequences of the reaction, $2 \times 4 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$. Owing to the great number of comparisons, the significance threshold was set at .001.

The effects of participants' age and gender were not significant. The effects of the severity of the consequences of the aggression was significant, $F(1,184)=139.99, p<.001$. The more severe the consequences, the more the aggressor was expected to make the first move, $\eta^2_p=.43$. The effects of the severity of consequences of the reaction was significant, $F(1,184)=118.68, p<.001$. The more severe the reaction, the less the aggressor was expected to make the first move, $\eta^2_p=.39$. The effect of the durability of the consequences of the aggression for the victim was also significant, $F(1,184)=68.52, p<.001$. The more durable the consequences, the more the aggressor was expected to make the first move, $\eta^2_p=.27$. Finally, the effect of the durability of the consequences of the reaction for the aggressor was significant, $F(1,184)=51.20, p<.001$. The more durable the consequences, the less the aggressor was expected to make the first move, $\eta^2_p=.22$.

In addition, three interactions involving these four factors were significant. The first one is depicted in Figure 1. When the consequences of the aggression were minor and the reaction was very severe, the aggressor was much less expected to make the first move than in the three other cases, $F(1,184)=41.93, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.19$. The two other interactions are depicted in Figure 2. When the consequences of the aggression had disappeared, and the consequences of the reaction were still present, the aggressor was much less expected to make the first move than in the three other cases, $F(1,184)=19.56, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.10$, and this applied even more when the aggression had severe consequences than when it had minor consequences, $F(1,184)=15.10, p<.001, \eta^2_p=.08$. No interaction involving the participants' gender or age was



significant.

Figure 1. Participants' mean responses as a function of the severity of the first aggressive act and the severity of the consequences of the victim's reaction (top panel). Participants' mean responses as a function of the severity of the first aggressive act, the durability of the consequences of this act and the durability of the consequences of the victim's reaction (bottom panel). In both panels, the dotted line represents the center of the response scale.

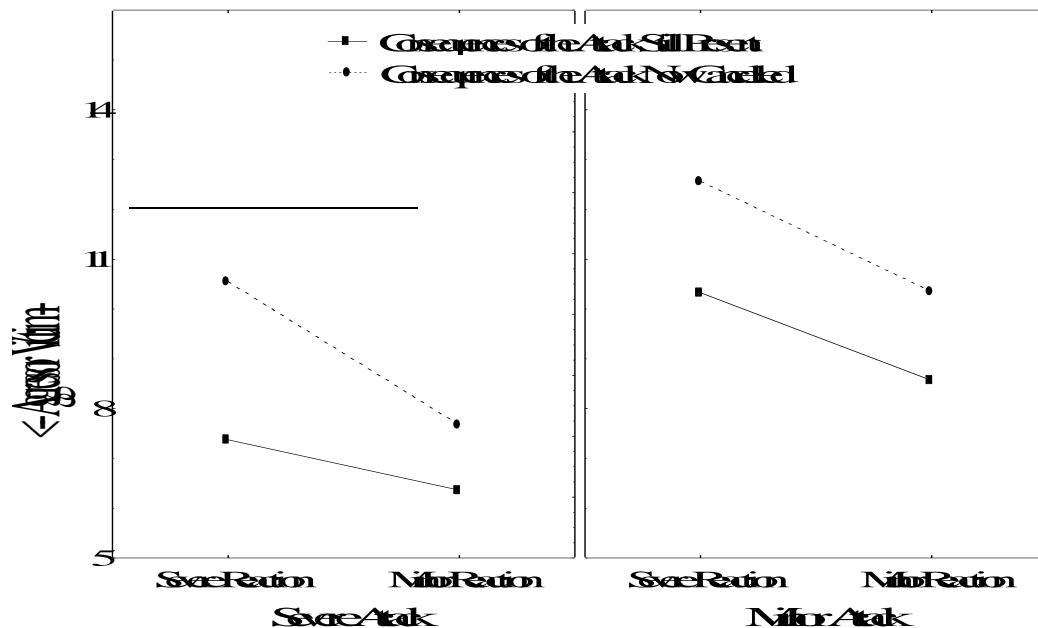


Figure 2.

Table 1 shows the mean ratings as a function of the scenario (overall and as a function of the participants' age). The 16 different scenarios (in terms of the only four significant factors) have been ordered from the one with the lowest mean rating to the one with the highest mean rating. In no less than five cases, there was considerable uncertainty as to whom was expected to make the first move.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined complex decision-making situations in which an aggressive act had been committed by an individual, and the victim of the act had reacted to the aggression in a way that may have been out of proportion with the severity of the initiating offense. Who, in these conditions, is expected to make the first move (e.g., offering apologies and perhaps initiating a forgiveness/reconciliation process)? The first hypothesis was that, in general, the person who committed the first aggressive act was expected to make the first move. The results supported this hypothesis. Unsurprisingly, the participants almost always designated the aggressor as the person who must make the first move. These results are consistent with most previous findings (e.g., Ohbuchi, 1999)

The second and third hypotheses were that (a) the less the consequences of the aggression were severe and durable, and (b) the more the consequences of the reactions were severe and durable, the less the aggressor was expected to make the first move. The results supported these hypotheses. They are consistent with previous findings (e.g., Gonzales, Manning & Haugen, 1992; Itoi, Ohbuchi & Fukuno, 1996).

Table 1. The sixteen situations ranked as a function of the mean participants' responses. The numbers in the left column are represented in the x-axis of Figure 1.

	Severity of the Act		Durability of Consequences		Overall	Age Groups			
	Aggression	Reaction	For the Victim	For the Aggressor		15-20	21-30	31-49	50+
1	Severe	Minor	Durable	Short-Term	5.84	4.01	5.93	6.66	6.65
2	Severe	Minor	Durable	Durable	6.69	5.42	7.46	6.73	7.41
3	Severe	Severe	Durable	Short-Term	6.88	5.16	6.85	7.75	7.70
4	Severe	Minor	Short-Term	Short-Term	7.02	6.06	7.50	7.25	7.37
5	Minor	Minor	Durable	Short-Term	7.40	5.25	8.48	7.89	7.99
6	Severe	Severe	Durable	Durable	8.06	6.92	8.48	8.57	7.60
7	Minor	Minor	Durable	Durable	8.23	7.16	9.21	8.51	7.66
8	Severe	Severe	Short-Term	Short-Term	8.33	7.11	9.16	8.70	7.92
9	Minor	Minor	Short-Term	Short-Term	9.05	7.68	9.55	9.92	8.63
10	Severe	Minor	Short-Term	Durable	9.69	10.44	11.31	8.82	8.55
11	Minor	Severe	Durable	Short-Term	9.73	8.67	11.24	9.34	9.77
12	Minor	Minor	Short-Term	Durable	11.38	12.26	12.51	10.28	10.14
13	Severe	Severe	Short-Term	Durable	11.41	12.38	12.72	10.51	10.13
14	Minor	Severe	Short-Term	Short-Term	11.67	12.03	14.02	10.75	9.72
15	Minor	Severe	Durable	Durable	12.42	13.65	14.42	12.09	10.76
16	Minor	Severe	Short-Term	Durable	13.75	13.74	16.02	12.56	11.16

The way these factors combined their effects was, however, not additive. In other words, when the severity of the consequences of the aggression was minor and the severity of the consequences of the reaction was very severe, the participants' responses were close to the neutral point of the response scale. That is to say, in this type of situation, there was considerable uncertainty as to which of two people involved must decide to make the first move. In addition, the two durability factors, and the severity of the consequences of the aggression factor also interacted. These results are consistent with the many findings showing that circumstances matter much (e.g., McPherson Frantz & Bennisson, 2005). When the aggression had minor and short-term consequences and the reaction had long-term consequences, the participants' responses were close to the neutral point of the response scale. There was again considerable uncertainty as to which of the two persons involved must decide to make the first move. Overall, there were five (out of sixteen) situations in which the victim of the first aggressive act, was expected to make the first move to the same extent as the initial aggressor.

These findings suggest that after the victims have retaliated and made more damage to the offenders, they, logically, occupy a tag of an offender rather than that of a victim, even if they have been offended first. This cancellation (though not proportionate) leaves it difficult to decide who should make the first move as both have, in a way occupied offender's as well as victim's position. Or it may be inferred that the victims of the first order are always held under mercy and people in general are inclined against the first perpetrators/initiators even if they are victimized more severely in the second order (after receiving retaliation from the victim). This neutrality of the responses is indicative of the very speculation. This attitude remains constant across all age groups and both the gender as the present study did not find any effect of either of these. This should be subjected to further investigation.

The fourth hypothesis was that the younger the victim, the less the aggressor was expected to make the first move. This hypothesis was not supported; and no gender effect (aggressor's gender or participants' gender) was found.

In summary, the present results shed light on an interesting asymmetry. When the initiators of the harmful situation comparatively suffered least, the participants clearly designated them as the ones who must decide to make the first move. However, when the initiators of the harmful situation comparatively suffered most (owing to the victims' disproportionate reactions), there was considerable uncertainty as to designating whom was expected to make the first move. As a result, these situations may be considered as presenting distinctive characters that make them appear the most intractable ones, even in the case where the level of the severity of the consequences was relatively minor.

Therefore, the present investigation propels us to supplement more information regarding the complexities of such decision-making situations where seeking and giving apology is warranted. It throws light on a new avenue in the area of apology and forgiveness, as it widens the scope of understanding seeking and granting forgiveness in the light of intricate circumstances confronted by each one of us every day: To what extent does the relative rarity of the offering of apologies in everyday conflict situation observed by Zechmeister and Romero (2002; Exline, Deshea, & Holeman, 2007) relate to the difficulty facing each of use at, in most circumstances, unambiguously attributing clear aggressor's status or clear victim's status to protagonists?

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