Apologies and Transformational Leadership

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ABSTRACT. This empirical investigation showed that contrary to the popular notion that apologies signify weakness, the victims of mistakes made by leaders consistently perceived leaders who apologized as more transformational than those who did not apologize. In a field experiment (Study 1), male referees who were perceived as having apologized for mistakes made officiating hockey games were rated by male coaches ($n = 93$) as more transformational than when no apology was made. Studies 2 ($n = 50$) and 3 ($n = 224$) replicated this effect in two vignette studies to enhance internal and ecological validity. Contrary to expectations in Study 3, there were no apology×leader gender interactions. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

KEY WORDS: apologies, moral leadership, transformational leadership

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Introduction

> "If you have behaved badly, repent, make what amends you can and address yourself to the task of behaving better next time." – Aldous Huxley

> "No sensible person ever made an apology." – Ralph Waldo Emerson.

With increasing media coverage of the self-serving and often unrepentant behavior of certain corporate leaders, it would be easy to conclude that modern leadership reflects the views of Emerson rather than Huxley. While recent high profile cases serve to reinforce waning public and employee confidence in corporate leadership, we suggest that ethical leaders who attempt to "do the right thing" with their words and actions will be perceived as better leaders by followers. Instead of denying their mistakes, ethical leaders apologize, make amends, and take steps to avoid repeating transgressions in the future. Indeed, some popular writers have recently argued that apologizing is a prerequisite for high quality leadership (Blanchard and McBride, 2003; Lazare, 2004; Timson, 2003). Although providing a genuine apology can be a humbling experience, particularly for individuals in leadership positions, research evidence is beginning to suggest (e.g., Kim et al., 2004) that apologies are critical in rebuilding and sustaining long-term relationships.

While research and popular writings each point to the interpersonal benefits of an apology, reports suggest that sincere apologies actually occur relatively infrequently in organizations (Timson, 2003; Weeks, 2003). Two reasons might account for this.

First, public admissions of fault are perceived by many leaders as embarrassing, a sign of weakness that threatens their authority (Jackall, 1988), even worsening sensitive situations (Folger and Skarlicki, 2001). Second, organizational leaders are often counseled that apologizing to the aggrieved could expose the individuals or their organizations to litigation (e.g., Neckers, 2002). In sharp contrast to this apparent conventional wisdom, we suggest that apologizing following wrong-doing will positively influence leadership perceptions. In particular, we believe that leaders who apologize will be perceived as looking beyond self-interest for the good of the relationship, thus embodying many elements of transformational leadership (i.e., inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration; Bass, 1998).

While the interpersonal effects of apology have garnered increased attention, surprisingly little research has examined the implications of an apology on subsequent leader-follower relations. With few exceptions (e.g., Giacalone and Payne, 1995; Tomlinson et al., 2004), most studies on apologies involve participants of equal role status in non-organizational settings. In this paper, we present three studies that examine follower perceptions of leaders who apologize following misconduct. The first study examines apology in a field context involving ice hockey coaches. Studies 2 and 3 attempt to replicate findings in Study 1, enhance internal and ecological validity, and explore the effects of leader gender on perceptions of transformational leadership. Collectively, these studies provide compelling evidence that leadership perceptions among followers are higher when an apology is provided compared to when no apology is given.

The nature of an apology

Apologies belong to the class of speech acts known as accounts, which are tools used to respond to perceived offences or misunderstandings. Building upon Scott and Lyman's (1968) earlier work, Schlenker (1980) classified accounts into four categories: excuses, justifications, denials, and apologies (or concessions). Excuses involve admitting wrong-doing but refusing to take personal responsibility. Justifications are the opposite, involving an admission of responsibility but a denial of wrong-doing. Denials refute both responsibility and wrong-doing. Finally, in an apology, the transgressor both admits the act was wrong, accepts responsibility for the offence, expresses empathy, offers penance, and promises not to repeat the untoward behavior in the future (Goffman, 1971; Schmitt et al., 2004).

Most explanations for the nature and consequences of an apology fall under impression management theory. Goffman (1971) classified apologies as a type of remedial work. Specifically, he used the image of ''splitting of the self'' (p. 113): one half of the individual representing the wrongdoing, and the other half sympathetic to the victim, hoping to be forgiven. In a somewhat different view, Schlenker (1980) argued that apologies are a more self-serving impression management tactic that individuals use to maintain their social standing and save face. From both perspectives, apologies constitute a visible and unambiguous behavior that enables victims to view a leader's behavior as a socially responsible reaction to wrongdoing. A sincere apology signals vulnerability and transmits moral meaning, allowing the repair of interpersonal relationships to begin.

Research shows that apologies are complex speech acts, which can have a range of positive effects, including generating forgiveness (Exline et al., 2004), restoring trust (Kim et al., 2004), reducing aggression (Ohbuchi et al., 1989), enhancing future relationship closeness, and promoting well-being (Hodgins and Liebeskind, 2003; Witvliet et al., 2002). Individual and situational correlates of apologies have included transgressor and victim gender (e.g., Gonzales et al., 1990; Hodgins and Liebeskind, 2003), context of apology (Folkes and Whang, 2003; Sigal et al., 1988), apology timing (Skarlicki et al., 2004), perpetrator autonomy (Folkes and Whang, 2003; Hodgins et al., 1996), offence severity (e.g., Tomlinson et al., 2004), status of offender (Gonzales et al., 1990), and degree of relationship (Hodgins and Liebeskind, 2003).

While there has been considerable research attention placed on understanding the nature and consequences of apologies, research on the relationship between apologies and leadership is scant. To our knowledge, only one laboratory-based study of apologies has manipulated offender status (Gonzales et al., 1990), and one study examined follower reactions to excuses, denials, or justifica-

tions offered by organizational leaders for decisions (Schaubroeck et al., 1994). No studies directly examine how followers perceive leaders who account for their mistakes with apologies. We believe that apologies can play an important role in developing and repairing leadership perceptions in organizations, and ground this prosocial orientation in transformational leadership theory.

Apologies and socially constructing leadership

Among all theories of leadership, transformational leadership theory was the most frequently studied in the 1990's (Judge and Bono, 2001) and has been shown in various contexts to be related to higher socio-moral reasoning (Turner et al., 2002), increased motivation (e.g., Charbonneau et al., 2001), higher business performance (e.g., Barling et al., 1996), and reduced workplace injuries (e.g., Barling et al., 2002. Transformational leadership is primarily distinguished from other theories of leadership by its focus on follower development (Avolio, 1999). Transformational leaders display four specific characteristics: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Idealized influence stems from leaders' ethical behavior. As role models, leaders build respect and trust among followers. Leaders create inspirational motivation by raising followers' personal expectations and setting new, higher aspirations for individuals and groups. Intellectual stimulation is enhanced when leaders challenge followers to think for themselves and re-consider old problems in new ways. Lastly, transformational leaders grant their followers individual consideration by paying attention to their unique needs and abilities (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999).

While a great deal is known about the effects of transformational leadership, a key issue remains unexamined: when and how do followers begin to see leaders as transformational? In everyday life, people may pay little attention to routine social interactions (Berger and Luckman, 1966). In times of crisis, however, individuals become more cognizant of the behavior of others as they seek to make sense of the abnormal situation. These situations may lead to the development of strong impressions based on observed reactions and

responses of others, particularly those in positions of authority. This perspective is consistent with a social constructionist view of leadership, which conceptualizes leadership as constructed through language, social interaction, and the formation of shared meaning (Chen and Meindl, 1991). We propose that followers' lasting and most salient perceptions of their leaders are primarily based on distinct interactions that, while occurring relatively infrequently, serve to punctuate or reinforce the status quo. We will refer to these situations as *critical moments*.

In organizational contexts, significant points in time in working relationships provide opportunities for supervisors and employees to construct leadership. For example, how a manager copes with a sudden drop in sales may function as an opportunity for the employee to evaluate the manager's leadership skills. The manager who unfairly blames employees for the decline is likely to decrease subordinates' perceptions of her leadership; the manager who shares responsibility and apologizes for acute problems may be perceived more positively. In these hypothetical but highly salient situations, the reaction to the critical moment supersedes in importance previous taken-for-granted interactions with the leader, which followers use as a wellspring of cues for forming leadership perceptions.

Surprisingly, researchers have yet to test the widespread belief in many managerial circles that leaders should avoid apologizing for mistakes lest they be seen as weak. In contrast, we hypothesize that a leader's apology for a transgression will enhance follower perceptions of their transformational leadership for two reasons. First, when individuals perceive their leader is fair based on the way he or she behaves (e.g., apologizing), they are likely to believe their leader engages in those behaviors willingly. This is critical as one major component of transformational leadership is idealized influence, which is manifested when leaders act on their values and are guided by their beliefs, choosing to do the right thing (Bass, 1998). Second, leaders who apologize will be seen as doing so because they care for the individual and the relationship, which reflects individualized consideration, another integral component of transformational leadership. We argue that mistakes, wrongdoing, and other unusual

situations are critical moments that attune followers to the behavioral intentions of their leaders. Further, that apologies offered in response to these types of incidents are associated with higher transformational leadership perceptions. Therefore:

> *Hypothesis 1*: Leaders who apologize for mistakes will be perceived as more transformational than leaders who do not apologize for mistakes.

Research on gender and leadership indicates that women struggle to be perceived as leaders in organizations (Liu and Wilson, 2001). A number of studies have shown that women are rated higher in transformational leadership than males (e.g., Bass et al., 1996; Eagly et al., 2003), and that the components of transformational leadership are more consistently linked with positive outcomes than the components of transactional leadership, on which men on average score higher than women. There is also some evidence suggesting that perceptions of leaders who apologize may be influenced by leader gender. Laboratory-based studies have found that women tend to offer more frequent and richer apologies than men (Gonzales et al., 1990, 1992). In contrast, men are more likely to avoid apologizing, and instead show a greater preference to use aggravating accounts such as denials (e.g., Hodgins and Liebeskind, 2003). However, Tata (1998) illustrates what may be a gender bias among followers against female managers. She found that female managers were evaluated more harshly by subordinates than male managers when they used aggravating accounts (denials). The inconsistency between gender-focused research on transformational leadership and apologies leaves us with a necessarily more exploratory set of research hypotheses regarding the interaction of apologies and leader gender on transformational leadership. Therefore:

> *Hypothesis 2a*: Female leaders who apologize will be rated more highly on transformational leadership than will male leaders who apologize.

> *Hypothesis 2b*: Female leaders who do not apologize will be rated lower on transformational leadership than will male leaders who do not apologize.

We conducted three studies to test our three hypotheses (Hypothesis 1 and Hypotheses 2a and 2b). To our knowledge, no studies that investigate apologies have been conducted in field settings. Replication beyond the laboratory to situations that maximize ecological validity remains a next step. Thus, our first study tests the effect of apologies offered by amateur ice hockey referees to competitive level hockey team coaches for mistakes committed during officiating a hockey game.

Study 1

Method

Overview and context
This study was conducted in the context of referees apologizing (or not) to amateur competitive league hockey coaches for mistakes made while officiating a game. Amateur hockey players who aspire to professional careers compete at the competitive level for positions on junior hockey teams, from which professional teams recruit prospective players. The opportunity to play elite hockey, and potentially be rewarded with lucrative contracts in the future, raises the salience of errors committed by referees in calling plays. Indeed, hockey referees are frequently targets of strong criticism from spectators, players, and coaches for perceived errors (Irvin, 1997).

Referees do more than apply rules and procedures to ensure fair outcomes between teams; they serve as leaders when they seek to influence coaches and players to engage in appropriate behaviors, and impose penalties (discipline) when infractions occur. Indeed, research suggests that amateur players perceive sports officials as influential figures during games (Wann et al., 2000). Further, studies of both American college football officials (Ittenbach and Elter, 1988) and German referees of a range of competitive sports (Brand and Ness, 2004) found that referees' personality traits were similar to other individuals with "well-developed qualities of leadership" (Ittenbach and Elter, 1988, p. 121).

Reports of apologies offered by professional sports referees and umpires to coaches, players, and spec-

tators illustrate the complex roles and responsibilities of these officials. Decisions by referees can have large consequences for the outcome of a game, and as many spectators and commentators attest (e.g., Irvin, 1997), mistakes are not uncommon although apologies are. Nonetheless, consistent with our first hypothesis, apologizing may be an important way in which referees can enhance their status as perceived by athletes and coaches.

Participants

Head coaches of competitive level hockey teams located in two geographically separated hockey associations in Canada were invited by telephone to participate in the study. Coaches were randomly assigned to receive one of two questionnaires, which asked them to recall one of two conditions: (1) a situation in which a referee with whom they are familiar apologized for making a mistake in a game; or (2) a situation in which a referee with whom they are familiar did not apologize for making a mistake in a game. Questionnaires provided no definitions of what constituted an apology or a mistake, asked respondents to describe briefly how they felt about the situation in which the mistake had occurred, and contained the transformational leadership measure described below. In addition, participants indicated their own age, gender, number of years coaching a competitive level team, and the gender of the focal referee. Coaches were asked to return their survey completed if they could recall the situation assigned to them, and return it blank if they could not. Four lotteries of fifty dollars each were offered as an incentive for participation in this study.

Three hundred and thirty-eight head coaches of competitive level hockey teams (with players aged 8–17 years) agreed to participate and were sent questionnaires, and 156 surveys were returned (46% response rate). Of these, 94 were usable as the coach had recalled the situation as described in their instructions (43 for the apology condition, 51 for the no apology condition).

The mean age of respondents with useable data was 42.35 years (SD = 6.83 years), all were male, had coached an average of 7.89 years (SD = 6.66 years), and all game situations involved male referees. Respondents who recalled the situation described in their instructions were, on average, 2.59 years younger ($p < 0.05$) than those who did not, but did not differ on amount of coaching experience. There were no significant differences on demographic variables for those in the apology condition versus those the no apology condition. As transformational leadership perceptions did not differ significantly across demographic variables, we collapsed analyses across age and coaching experience.

Measure

Transformational leadership was measured using a modified version of Carless et al. (2000) seven-item Global Transformational Leadership scale (see Appendix 1 for the items). We chose this shortened and validated scale instead of the more widely used Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass and Avolio, 1995) because of its brevity and clear unidimensionality. We eliminated one of the seven-items (i.e., "My leader fosters trust, involvement, and cooperation among team members") given its focus on team, instead of the individual relationship with the leader represented in the remaining six items. These items were adapted to fit the situation. For example, one item was re-worded to state: "This referee approaches each game with a clear and positive outlook." Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale measuring behavioral frequency (0 = rarely or never to 4 = very frequently). The coefficient alpha for this scale was 0.93.

Results and Discussion

Our first hypothesis was supported: referees who apologized were rated by coaches as more transformational (M = 2.50, SD = 0.81) than those who did not (M = 1.51, SD = 1.04), $t(91) = 5.07$, $p < 0.001$.

Results from Study 1 offered preliminary support for the hypothesis that leaders who apologize for mistakes are viewed as more transformational. Nonetheless, despite the fact that the study was conducted in a field setting, some limitations limit the robustness of the main finding. First, the absence of formal definitions of what constituted an apology, and to a lesser extent what a mistake was, made each phenomenon open to individual interpretation, representing a possible threat to internal validity.

Second, while many referees influence coach understandings and behaviors through open communication and assessing fouls (e.g., punishment), the relevance of this specific setting to the relationship between leaders and subordinates in organizations remains to be demonstrated. To overcome these limitations, we conducted a second study to enhance the construct validity of an apology, provide respondents with a common mistake stimulus, and to better reflect a more traditional leader-subordinate interaction in an organizational setting.

Study 2

Method

Overview
To overcome these three potential limitations, we conducted a vignette study. First, construct validity was enhanced because four components of an apology were included in the scenario to ensure that all participants in the apology condition faced the same social account. Second, all respondents reacted to the same situation, involving an identical mistake scenario made by a supervisor. Third, ecological validity to leadership in organizational contexts was enhanced because the scenario involved a supervisor who either apologized or did not apologize to an undergraduate student who did not receive their wages due to an error maybe by the supervisor.

Participants
Fifty male students at a mid-sized Canadian business school were recruited to participate in this vignette study. The average age of the participants was 23 years (SD = 4.38). All participants received a lottery ticket as compensation for their participation. There was no relationship between age and transformational leadership thus we collapsed analyses across the demographic variable.

Instrument
The study used a between-subjects factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to either the apology or no apology condition. In the apology condition, a supervisor was depicted as taking responsibility for a management mistake, expressing

empathy and regret, and a promise to change his behavior following the transgression. Twenty-four participants faced the apology condition, with 26 participants in the non-apology condition. Both groups read a short scenario in which the transgression was described as follows:

> It is 2 months into your summer job at a large firm in Toronto. You have been working hard and getting along well with your manager, Andrew. Next week is your week off, and you and your friends have planned your first ever trip to Las Vegas. Your parents disapprove of Vegas, so you're paying for it all on your own. You haven't saved enough, but with this week's pay, you will be able to afford the trip. When you check your bank account, it turns out you have not been paid. You approach Andrew and ask him where your pay check is. He says, "You skipped work last week. So I told the payroll department to dock your pay." You did not skip work that week; you were in fact working on a special project in another department, to which Andrew had assigned you several weeks ago, but he had apparently forgotten. You explain this to Andrew, then tell him you will have to cancel your trip if he can't pay you by the next day. He responds:

For those in the non-apology condition, the vignette closed with Andrew saying:

> "Oh – so then you didn't skip work. Huh. Unfortunately, I can't do anything for you right now – you won't get the pay fixed for a month."

In contrast, Andrew responded as follows in the apology condition:

> "Oh no! This is completely my fault – I shouldn't have been so hasty. Unfortunately, I can't do anything for you – you won't get the pay fixed for a month. I appreciate that this will make things difficult for you, I promise you, it won't happen again. Please accept my sincerest apologies."

After reading the vignette, participants completed a questionnaire designed to establish the validity of the manipulations and transformational leadership perceptions. The first three items on the questionnaire were manipulation checks. The first measured whether participants believed that a mistake was

made: "Putting yourself in the shoes of the student, to what degree do you think that the manager made a mistake?" The second item measured whether participants believed that an apology had been offered: "Putting yourself in the shoes of the student, to what degree do you think the manager provide a sincere apology?" The third item assessed the perceived plausibility of the vignette: "This situation is plausible." Responses to all of these questions were given on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*most certainly*) scale.

Participants then completed the Carless et al. (2000) transformational leadership scale as described in Study 1. We again scored each item on the 5-point Likert-type scale, and removed the item with the team referent, leaving six items with a coefficient alpha of 0.86.

Results

Manipulation checks
The manipulation checks confirmed the validity of mistake, apology, and plausibility manipulations. First, there was no difference between scenarios on the perceptions that the supervisor had made a mistake, $t(47) = 1.06$, *ns*. Across both the apology conditions, participants believed that the manager had made a mistake ($M = 6.31$, SD = 1.18). Second, participants were more likely to believe that a sincere apology had been offered in the apology condition ($M = 5.29$, SD = 1.52) than the no apology ($M = 2.44$, SD = 1.39) condition, $t(47) = 6.87$, $p < 0.001$. Third, the perceived plausibility of the two vignettes was high ($M = 5.69$, SD = 1.23), with no differences between the two apology conditions, $t(47) = 0.81$, *ns*.

Transformational leadership perceptions
We then tested the hypothesis that perceptions of transformational leadership would differ across conditions. In the apology condition, the mean score on transformational leadership ($M = 3.41$, SD = 1.04) was higher than in the no apology condition ($M = 2.79$, SD = 0.97), $t(47) = 2.17$, $p < 0.05$.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 replicate and extend those of Study 1: leaders were seen to be higher in transfor-

mational leadership after apologizing for a mistake even after being careful to exclude possible threats to construct and ecological validity. Together, therefore, the results from Studies 1 and 2 suggested that male leaders who apologize for mistakes are perceived as more transformational than male leaders who do not apologize for mistakes.

Nonetheless, all the participants in these studies were male, as were the referees and the manager portrayed in the vignette, thus limiting the ability to generalize beyond male dyads because of findings showing consistent gender differences in transformational leadership (Eagly et al., 2003). As a result, we conducted a third study that included an explicit focus on whether leader gender moderates the effects of an apology on perceptions of transformational leadership.

Study 3

Overview

Study 3 had two aims. The first was to replicate the findings of Study 2 in a vignette context in which we provided participants with a common mistake and a complete apology definition. The second investigated whether the gender of the leader in the vignette would moderate any effects of an apology on perceptions of transformational leadership by using both male (Andrew) and female (Anne) supervisors in the vignette.

Method

Participants
Two hundred 24 students at a mid-sized Canadian business school were recruited for this electronic survey. The average age of the participants was 20.62 years (SD = 3.38). Of the participants, 48.2% were male and 51.8% were female. All participants received either bonus course credit or a lottery ticket as compensation for participation. Transformational leadership perceptions did not differ significantly by age or respondent gender, as a result of which we did not include either variable as covariates in the analyses.

Design

This study used a 2 (apology condition: apology versus no apology)×2 (leader gender: male versus female) between-subjects factorial design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. There were between 49 and 65 respondents in each condition.

Instrument

Participants were randomly assigned to either of the two scenarios (apology and no apology condition) described in Study 2 and completed the same questionnaire. As already noted, the scenario described a mistake that was made over a summer student's pay, who as a result could not afford a much anticipated vacation. Participants in the apology condition read a scenario that described the supervisor apologizing for the mistake (i.e., admission of mistake, accepting responsibility, expressions of remorse, and an action plan for the future). As in Study 2, the no apology condition excluded these elements.

Results

Manipulation checks

Consistent with Study 2, the manipulation checks confirmed the validity of the manipulations. There was no difference among scenarios on the perceptions that the supervisor had made a mistake, $F(3,220) = 0.94$, *ns*. Participants believed that the manager had made a mistake irrespective of the condition to which they had been assigned ($M = 6.42$, SD = 1.15). With respect to apology making, participants were more likely to believe that an apology had been offered in the two conditions containing an apology ($M = 4.69$, SD = 1.86) than the two conditions containing no apology ($M = 2.02$, SD=1.29) condition, $t(220) = 12.37$, $p < 0.001$. Participants saw all scenarios as equally realistic ($M = 5.23$, SD = 1.39), $F(3, 220) = 0.53$, *ns*.

Transformational leadership perceptions

A 2×2 analysis of variance was conducted on participants' perceptions of transformational leadership, yielding a significant effect of apologizing, $F(1, 220) = 17.29$, $p < 0.001$, and leader gender $F(1, 220) = 3.66$, $p < 0.05$. As in Studies 1 and 2, leaders who apologized for the mistake ($M = 3.16$, SD = 1.07) were rated more transformational than leaders who did not apologize for the mistake ($M = 2.57$, SD = 1.06). Male leaders ($M = 2.99$. SD = 1.10) received higher transformational leadership scores than female leaders ($M = 2.71$, SD = 1.09), regardless of whether the leader apologized for the mistake or not. There was no effect for the interaction between apology and leader gender, $F(3,220) = 0.68$, *ns*, providing no support for hypotheses 2a and 2b.

General discussion

These studies represent a first attempt to examine follower assessments of leaders after they apologize for a mistake. In Study 1, we found that male ice hockey referees who apologized to male coaches for mistakes they made during games were rated higher in transformational leadership than referees who did not apologize for an error. Study 2 replicated and extended the findings of Study 1. As the vignette was situated in an organizational context dealing with a supervisor-employee issue, and because a specific definition of an apology was provided, both internal and ecological validity were enhanced. Again, the positive effect of apologizing on transformational leadership perceptions was found. Finally, in Study 3, we replicated and extended these findings by manipulating leader gender using the vignette used in Study 2. Collectively, these results offer strong support that apologizing after wrongdoing is related to higher perceptions of transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership has received considerable research attention in the last decade more than all leadership approaches combined (Judge and Bono, 2001). However, studies have focused predominantly on demonstrating the effects of transformational leadership. Our research considered behavioral incidents that inform follower perceptions of transformational leadership. These findings contribute to our understanding of the development of leadership perceptions in organizational settings via interpersonal accounts in response to critical moments. Within this perspective, followers evaluate their leadership qualities based on leader behavior to such unique moments. These situations are salient

to subordinates, and result in close evaluation of the leader's words and actions.

Any effects of an apology on leadership may be especially important for transformational leadership theory, as apology is particularly consistent with two of the four components of transformational leadership. First, apologies demonstrate idealized influence, by emphasizing the importance of behaving in an ethical manner and taking responsibility for one's actions. As Mills (2001) suggests, leaders are "humanized by apologizing in a way that a wrongdoer who remains silent and appears indifferent to public opinion is not" (p. 115). Second, apologies also show caring for the employee and the leader–employee relationship, exhibiting individualized consideration.

The results of Study 3 did not support hypotheses that leader gender interacted with apologizing to explain additional variance in perceptions of transformational leadership. We found that respondents rated male supervisors in a vignette more transformational in both the apology and no apology conditions. These findings are somewhat surprising given findings from other studies which suggest that females are generally rated higher in transformational leadership (Eagly et al., 2003) and tend to offer more and richer concessionary accounts for perceived interpersonal breaches than males (Gonzales et al., 1990, 1992). We offer three possible explanations for these unexpected findings. First, we believe that the relative infrequency of apology as an artifact of everyday organizational life may partially explain this finding. On one hand, there seems to be reluctance among many organizational leaders to offer apologies to subordinates because leaders are averse to voluntarily admitting personal mistakes. On the other hand, while followers may desire that a leader make amends for offences, they may also not expect an apology based on their past experiences with leaders and cynicism about leaders in general who appear to put self-interest ahead of moral action. Thus, when leaders voluntarily apologize for their misdeeds, it can make a powerful impression on followers who were not anticipating the apology. In Study 2, there may have been an additive effect for male leader apologies because participants expected them to apologize less frequently for transgressions compared to females. The relationship between the frequency

of apology and victim perceptions is an important area that warrants future research.

A second possible explanation parallels Tata's (1998) findings regarding the harsher evaluations of females' social accounts in aggravated situations. The vignette used in Studies 2 and 3 concerned a mistake made by the supervisor, with all respondents regardless of condition in these studies rating the presence of a mistake by the supervisor as significant. Under these conditions, the expectation of stereotypical female managers' behaviors might be different than stereotypical male managers' behaviors. More specifically, female managers might not be expected to make such an error compared to male managers, and are thus rated more harshly on leadership behaviors. The more general evidence that female managers are rated as more transformational than male managers (Eagly et al., 2003) reflects a range of circumstances, rather than a specific context like in Studies 2 and 3 in which a mistake has been made.

Third and finally, the design of Studies 2 and 3 implicitly assumed that no gender differences would exist in terms of the manager's behavior when the mistake became known. All vignettes conditions were held constant, and we changed only the manager's names (i.e., Andrew or Anne). In an organizational context, female leaders may apologize in a qualitatively different way than male leaders; indeed, apology research suggests this to be the case (e.g., Hodgins and Liebeskind, 2003). This finding is also consistent with research that suggests that women's perceptions are more strongly affected by expressions of responsibility and regret than are men's (Tata, 2000). Thus, leader gender may be more salient in a less controlled, more ecologically rich research design. In this vignette, we attempted to change only gender, and not leader behavior, preferring to measure effects prompted only by gender categories, rather than by stereotypical behavior. We believe this austerity is another possible reason why an apology by leader gender effect was not isolated.

Limitations

Previous apology research has identified a range of correlates of apology effectiveness. Across the

current studies, we focused only on leadership and gender. In Study 1, for example, the seriousness of the referee's mistake and the number of past mistakes were not controlled. It is possible that the severity of the mistake during a game (e.g., failure to assess a penalty against an opponent early in a game versus failure to call a penalty in the last minute of a close championship game) influences transformational leadership perceptions. Similarly, in Studies 2 and 3, we did not manipulate the severity of the supervisor's breach. Gonzales et al. (1990) examined differences between low- and high-status apologizers and found that high-status actors may feel less pressure to offer concessionary accounts for less severe offences. For more severe offences, they found no differences between low- and high-status actors. In line with these findings, we would propose (all else being equal) that leaders who apologize for less serious offences would be rated as more transformational compared to leaders who do apologize in these situations. This is an important issue which future research might address.

In Studies 2 and 3, it is possible that the favorable results are due in part to an unfair comparison between the apology and no apology conditions (Cooper and Richardson, 1986). Study participants responding to the no apology condition were provided with a hurried and insensitive sounding response by the supervisor who withheld part of their pay. Some may see this response as unrealistic and provoking negative feelings in the participant, thus setting up a situation in which the apology condition produced markedly better leadership perceptions. Notwithstanding these concerns, we do not think that the vignettes make an unfair comparison for two reasons. First, the manipulation check of the apology and no apology conditions showed no significant differences in realism. Second, we argue that it is not unusual for some supervisors to demonstrate a high level of insensitivity and indifference in situations where they have made a mistake (Jackall, 1988). This may occur when the aggrieved subordinate is perceived as non-threatening (e.g., a summer student) or in times of organizational performance problems (Folger and Skarlicki, 2001).

As with all vignette studies, there are questions about whether participants would respond in the same way to the hypothetical situation as they would in real life. In the case of Studies 2 and 3, participants may have felt it socially desirable to respond favorably to the supervisor who apologized. It is possible that study participants who were confronted by a breach that negatively affected them may respond less favorably to an apology. Moving research on apologies in organizational contexts into the field, as opposed to simulations such as vignettes, will provide opportunities to externally validate the effect of apologies on leadership perceptions.

Finally, while the apology condition in Studies 2 and 3 included many key elements of apology, the respondent was not offered penance, which in this case could have been a monetary amount in lieu of the full amount of their pay check. Our intention was to make the apology as salient as possible. To do this, we intentionally left out an offer of restitution to the aggrieved because we believed it would dominate the four other elements of apology in essence undoing the mistake from the perspective of the respondent. Two recent studies found that this specific element of apology has a particularly strong effect (Bottom et al., 2002; Schmitt et al., 2004).

Directions for future research

There is a need for more research on leadership and apology, and in general, on the role of apologies in organizations both as a conflict management and relationship repair device. First, while there is ample evidence that leaders are averse to apologizing, we know very little about what leaders think of apologizing to subordinates. Qualitative research on responses to critical moments would provide insight into areas such as consequences on leader well-being and self-perceptions before and after social accounts are offered to followers.

Second, more research is needed on the contextual boundary conditions that may influence the effectiveness of leaders' apologies. For example, Sigal et al. (1988) found that political candidates were rated higher by voters when they denied rather than apologized for alleged misconduct. This suggests that followers may be cynical of leader apologies in some settings. Other evidence suggests that if an apology is perceived to have a manipulative intent it may aggravate a situation by decreasing follower percep-

tions of fairness (Skarlicki et al., 2004). Finally, as Giacalone and Payne (1995) found, apologies in organizations were less effective when there is a history of multiple offences. Taken together, these findings suggest that leaders who apologize must be sincere, learn from their mistakes, and avoid repeating untoward behavior. It may be that leaders who set out to manipulate followers with insincere apologies are taking a considerable risk to their long-term social standing. These questions could be addressed in longitudinal research on leaders' apologies and follower assessments.

Third, Kim et al. (2004) emphasize the importance of distinguishing between competency- and integrity-based errors in the context of apologies. They found that participants trusting intentions were higher when alleged offenders made apologies (versus denials) for matters of competence and denials (versus apologies) for matters of integrity. In the current studies, apologies for mistakes based on competence, rather than integrity, would be expected to be more effective in rebuilding trust and creating positive leadership impressions among followers. Post–hoc analyses of open-ended survey data collected in Study 1 revealed that coaches were more likely to recall referees who had made mistakes based on perceived issues of competency (e.g., being out of position to see a goal scored) rather than integrity (e.g., making biased judgments in favor of an opponent). In Studies 2 and 3, the supervisor's breach related to mistakenly withholding compensation, which is also a competency-based error.

Implications for practice

These findings have practical implications for leaders. First, the consistent apology effect suggests that leaders should re-consider current strategies of ignoring, denying their mistakes, or blaming others for their actions, and adopt instead a more proactive practice of taking responsibility for their actions and, when necessary, provide followers with sincere apologies. From a critical moments perspective, leaders are closely evaluated by followers in non-mundane situations. This suggests that leaders should do what is right, and not what is necessarily expedient or assume

that they can rely on accumulated social capital from past interactions with followers to rise above errors.

Relatedly, we are careful to emphasize that in presenting these findings, we do not advocate using apologies as a way of deliberately enhancing leader impressions, as Schlenker (1980) would suggest is a significant motivation of social accounts. Instead, we suggest that a genuine apology is the right thing to do in the case of a mistake.

Conclusion

Our research underscores the powerful role that apologizing can play in positively influencing follower perceptions of leaders, and, further, runs counter to the popular belief that apologizing reflects a sorry act of leadership. We found evidence that apologizing is consistent with higher ratings of transformational leadership. These findings address a theoretical gap of when and how followers develop perceptions of leaders, further establishing an understanding of the critical moments that can build and destroy leadership capability.

Acknowledgments

Appendix

Carless et al.'s (2000) Global Transformational Leadership scale

1. My supervisor communicates a clear and positive vision of the future.
2. My supervisor treats staff as individuals, supports and encourages their development.

3. My supervisor gives encouragement and recognition to staff.

4. My supervisor fosters trust, involvement and cooperation among team members.

5. My supervisor encourages thinking about problems in new ways and questions assumptions.

6. My supervisor is clear about his/her values and practices what he/she preaches.

7. My supervisor instills pride and respect in others and inspires me by being highly competent.

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