



## Articles

# An Explanation of Apology Acceptance Based on Lay Peoples' Insights

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## Abstract

Apologies play an important role in forgiveness, but the pathway from apology to forgiveness is unclear. Many researchers use Goffman's model of the corrective interchange, or models derived from it to guide their research. This model is based on the assumption that offenders apologise to victims who accept these apologies and that this leads to forgiveness. The acceptance of the apology is therefore central in this model, so we undertook a systematic literature review to determine how researchers conceptualise and measure apology acceptance and found a lack of clarity around the construct. We addressed this theoretical uncertainty by exploring whether lay people distinguish between apology acceptance and forgiveness, and if they do, how they describe apology acceptance. We use contemporary neuro-cognitive theories that explain social and moral decision-making and behaviour to integrate the themes we identified to develop a preliminary theoretical explanation of how the apology acceptance stage fits into Goffman's model.

**Keywords:** apology, acceptance, corrective interchange, forgiveness, neuro-cognitive

Interpersona, 2018, Vol. 12(1), 68–90, doi:10.5964/ijpr.v12i1.286

Received: 2017-10-11. Accepted: 2018-03-28. Published (VoR): 2018-07-06.

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People frequently behave in ways that lead to adverse consequences for themselves and others. Both offenders and victims of such transgressions risk losing social standing (Goffman, 1955; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), harm to their relationships (see Allan & Carroll, 2017 for a more comprehensive discussion), and personal psychological consequences (see, e.g., Freedman & Enright, 1996; Riek, Root Luna, & Schnabelrauch, 2014). Both parties therefore typically engage in what Goffman (1955, 1971) called a corrective interchange (interchange) during which victims typically expect offenders to account for their behaviour. Accounts can take the form of denying the behaviour, justifying it, offering excuses, or apologising (Gonzales, Haugen, & Manning, 1994), but scholars in psychology consider apologies the most remedial account because it is the most likely to lead to forgiveness (see, e.g., Takaku, 2001). Forgiveness is, in turn, a desirable outcome because of its demonstrated social, psychological, and health benefits for victims (see, e.g., Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009; Karremans & Van Lange, 2008; Lawler-Row, Karremans, Scott, Edlis-Matityahou, & Edwards, 2008; for a review, see Riek & Mania, 2012).

Researchers are therefore interested in understanding the psychological mechanisms that might explain how apologies promote forgiveness so they can find ways of maximising the process (Kirchhoff, Wagner, & Strack, 2012; McCullough et al., 1998; Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004). They generally use Goffman's

(1955, 1971) model of the interchange or adaptations thereof to empirically examine the relationship between apologies and forgiveness. Goffman postulated that after wrongs occur victims *challenge or reproach* offenders, offenders *offer apologies*, and victims *accept the apologies* (acceptance stage) to complete the interchange and restore equilibrium. Offenders might then *express gratitude* to victims for accepting the apology. Some scholars closely follow Goffman's model and include the acceptance stage (see, e.g., Hayes, 2006), but most conceptualize the interchange as "a three-step dialogical exchange where the victim demands an apology, the offender apologizes, and the victim expresses forgiveness" (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2008, p. 310). These authors, and others who imply forgiveness directly follows an apology (see, e.g., Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Heider, 1958; Okimoto, Wenzel, & Hornsey, 2015; Wohl, Hornsey, & Bennett, 2012), therefore appear to omit the acceptance stage from Goffman's model and instead suggest forgiveness is a direct outcome of apologies.

The empirical evidence is, however, that the relationship between apology and forgiveness is not necessarily definite and direct (Wohl et al., 2015). Researchers have, for instance, found evidence that apologies are not a prerequisite for forgiveness (e.g., Allan, Allan, Kaminer, & Stein, 2006) and sometimes fail to promote forgiveness (e.g., Dhimi, 2012; Eaton, Struthers, Shomrony, & Santelli, 2007; Wohl et al., 2012). Apologies might even exacerbate the situation in some circumstances (e.g., Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004; Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008). One possible explanation for these findings is that the acceptance stage plays an important role in the interchange. There has, however, to our knowledge not been any discussion or investigation of the nature and role of the acceptance stage in the interchange.

We therefore undertook a systematic review of the published empirical research to determine if researchers' findings support the existence of an acceptance stage, and if so, how they conceptualize and/or describe it. We included in our search studies on interpersonal (i.e., one-to-one), intergroup, and public (e.g., from celebrities or political leaders) apologies. We included the following EBSCOhost databases: PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, and Criminal Justice Abstracts, from January 1980 because an initial search revealed no relevant empirical research before that time. The following search filters were used within the EBSCOhost database service: i) English language publication; ii) published in a peer-reviewed journal; iii) empirical study; iv) exclude book reviews. A Boolean search phrase sequence was used, as follows: (apolog\* AND accept\*) OR (apolog\* AND reject\*) OR (apolog\* AND outcome) OR (apolog\* AND response) OR (apolog\* AND forgiv\*). We included the terms apolog\* AND forgiv\* to ensure we did not omit papers exploring forgiveness that also explored apology acceptance. In addition, the reference lists of selected papers were examined for further relevant articles. The authors of significant articles and other experts in the field were consulted as necessary to identify other relevant published studies.

The initial EBSCOhost database search returned 471 references (see Figure 1). After removing duplicates ( $N = 58$ ), 276 articles were excluded because they were irrelevant or had insufficient focus on the response to the apology. Another 122 articles were then excluded because they did not use acceptance of the apology as a variable. After searching the reference lists of relevant papers and consulting key authors we added two additional articles (Dhimi, 2016; Walfisch, Van Dijk, & Kark, 2013) that fit the inclusion criteria. Our final review included the 17 empirical articles set out in Table 1.

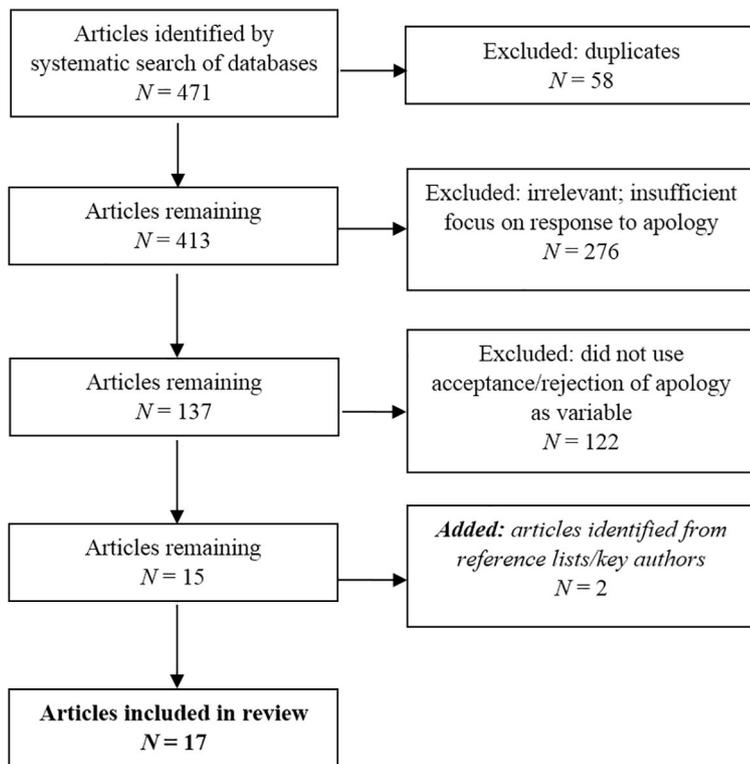


Figure 1. Flow diagram of systematic literature search process.

All the authors recognized the apology acceptance stage of the interchange, but they differ in how they conceptualize and describe it. Most of the authors of the papers (see references 1-4, 7-10, 12, 13, 16, 17 in Table 1) explicitly recognized the acceptance of an apology as a discrete stage in the interchange by describing it as a response that immediately follows an apology and/or by measuring the outcome of apologies using acceptance. Researchers who measured acceptance of apologies did so in different ways (see, e.g., Bennett & Earwaker, 1994; Kirchoff et al., 2012), but many merely asked participants to what extent they accepted the apology (e.g., Allan, Beesley, Attwood, & McKillop, 2014; Ohbuchi, Atsumi, & Takaku, 2008; Walfisch et al., 2013). Kirchoff and Čehajić-Clancy's (2014) study is unique, however, because they developed and used a six-item composite scale to measure acceptance of an apology, but they neither provide an empirical basis for using the relevant items, nor do they explain how they used the six individual scores to calculate whether participants accepted the apologies. Others simply coded apology acceptance as *accept* or *not accept* based on their post hoc analyses of data from public opinion polls (Cerulo & Ruane, 2014), online forums (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), journalistic reports (Kampf, 2008), and victim-offender mediation case files (Dhami, 2012).

Table 1

*Excerpts of Authors' Descriptions or Conceptualizations of the Acceptance of Apology*

Reference	Descriptions/Conceptualizations
1. Allan et al., 2014	<b>Discrete stage:</b> Participants reported accepting apologies when they considered them acceptable, i.e., the apology was <i>good enough</i> for the recipient to be satisfied.
2. Barlow et al., 2015	<b>Discrete stage:</b> "...more willing to reconcile with the victim group if an intergroup apology offered to the victim group is accepted (relative to rejected)..." (p. 40)
3. Bennett & Dewberry, 1994	<b>Discrete stage:</b> Conceptualized the acceptance of the apology as a step that can directly follow the offering of an apology "in which the person(s) for whom the offering is intended will acknowledge it [the apology] as a way of re-establishing the expressive order." (p. 12)
4. Bennett & Earwaker, 1994	<b>Discrete stage:</b> Use Goffman's model as framework; acceptance/rejection is direct response to apology: "...interactants are likely to complete the corrective interchange (challenge, offering, acceptance..." (p. 462) Measured participants' desire to reject apologies, and their likelihood of actually rejecting them.
5. Cerulo & Ruane, 2014	<b>Merged with forgiveness:</b> Discussed acceptance of apologies and included measures of apology acceptance in analysis, but reported as forgiveness. "Respondents were asked to answer using options such as forgive/cannot forgive/not ready to forgive or yes/no/not sure. We recorded percentages associated with positive responses such as 'I forgive' or 'yes'." (p. 138)
6. Chiles & Roloff, 2014	<b>Merged with forgiveness:</b> "When the target of an apology accepts the offer [of apology], he or she is communicating to some degree a willingness to move on..." (p. 66)
7. Coombs & Holladay, 2012	<b>Discrete stage:</b> "Acceptance of the apology is like account acceptance in the crisis response literature. It signals receivers find the response to be effective." (p. 290)
8. Dhami, 2012	<b>Discrete stage:</b> When accepting an apology, victims "expressed a desire to move on/put the past behind him/her." (p. 54) "...acceptance occurred when the victim believed the apology was genuine." (p. 57)
9. Dhami, 2016	<b>Discrete stage:</b> "In response to an apology, the recipient may accept the apology fully, accept it conditionally or reject it." (p. 111) Refers to an "apology-acceptance script" (p. 120) rather than the apology-forgiveness script that is commonly used by researchers.
10. Harth et al., 2011	<b>Discrete stage:</b> "...the acceptance of the apology, in which the person or group for whom the apology is intended will acknowledge this as a way of re-establishing the social relationship. [...] once [the offender] has decided to enter the path of social exchange through a gesture of reconciliation [an apology], [they] will expect the [recipient] to do the same." (p. 816)
11. Kampf, 2008	<b>Merged with forgiveness:</b> "...utterances of apology acceptance and forgiveness were performed by the directly offended parties..." (p. 584) "[This] is just one motive for apology acceptances in the political arena. Other motives for forgiveness are less dependent..." (p. 593)
12. Kirchhoff & Čehajić-Clancy, 2014	<b>Discrete stage:</b> Items used to assess apology acceptance inquired about their perception of the apology as acceptable/complete. "...forgiveness is not a sufficient indicator of the success for [an apology]. Accordingly, many authors have suggested [considering] the acceptance of or the satisfaction with the [apology] itself as an indicator for the success of [an apology]." (p. 432)
13. Kirchhoff et al., 2012	<b>Discrete stage:</b> "How and why can an apology be effective, accepted, and pave the way to forgiveness...?" (p. 110) "... whether the person forgives the offender ..., but also if the person accepts the apology. [...] Despite having forgiveness as the ultimate goal, the receiver of an apology can accept the apologetic utterance but is in no way required to forgive the offender." (p. 115)
14. Ohbuchi et al., 2008	<b>Merged with forgiveness:</b> Used acceptance of the apology to measure the response, but merged with forgiveness by constantly referring to forgiveness: "Apology is a verbal action by which the perpetrator [...] asks the victim for forgiveness." (p. 55) "When [an] apology is made, [...] victims are likely to forgive perpetrators..." (p. 55)
15. Risen & Gilovich, 2007	<b>Merged with forgiveness:</b> "...participants who read a version in which Susan or Amanda accepted the apology rated her as more forgiving." (p. 425) "By accepting the apology [...] a target can signal to themselves and others that the target is a kind, forgiving person." (p. 425)
16. Walfisch et al., 2013	<b>Discrete stage:</b> "...the effectiveness of their apology, namely, the extent to which their apology will be accepted by the other side." (p. 1448)
17. Wohl et al., 2015	<b>Discrete stage:</b> "...we assessed precursors to forgiveness: willingness to accept an apology as well as willingness to engage in the peace process." (p. 716)

No authors of any of the 17 papers defined the acceptance of apology but it was notable that some appeared to merge acceptance with forgiveness either by using the terms interchangeably as if they are synonymous (Kampf, 2008; Ohbuchi et al., 2008; Risen & Gilovich, 2007), or in the case of Cerulo and Ruane (2014) by using measurements of forgiveness to apparently measure the acceptance of apologies. Chiles and Roloff (2014) also appeared to merge acceptance and forgiveness by describing acceptance as a “willingness to move on”, which is a common way of describing forgiveness (see, e.g., Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005). The authors of three of the papers (Allan et al., 2014; Dhimi, 2012; Kirchoff & Čehajić-Clancy, 2014), however, explicitly measured apology acceptance and forgiveness separately and reported empirical evidence that suggests they are separate constructs. Researchers therefore appear to differ regarding whether or not they consider acceptance and forgiveness separate constructs and distinct stages in the interchange. Some of the researchers who seem to recognize the apology acceptance stage but appear to use forgiveness as a proxy (Dhimi, 2016) for the acceptance construct (e.g., Cerulo & Ruane, 2014; Kampf, 2008) most likely do so because they lack a definition for it.

A possible explanation for the apparently incompatible findings within the extant literature with respect to the relationship between apologies and forgiveness (see, e.g., Allan et al., 2006; Dhimi, 2012; Eaton et al., 2007; Skarlicki et al., 2004; Struthers et al., 2008; Wohl et al., 2012; Wohl et al., 2015) might therefore be the lack of an understanding of the acceptance construct and its role in the interchange, and the absence of a universally acceptable operational definition of apology acceptance. The ultimate aim of our more comprehensive research project is to develop a theoretical understanding of the acceptance construct, define it, and to understand the role it plays in the relationship between apologies and forgiveness in the interchange. Researchers such as Charmaz (2006), Creswell (2012), and Urquhart, Lehmann, and Myers (2010) suggest that when confronted with a construct for which no clear definition exists researchers should start by exploring lay peoples’ understanding of and experiences in respect of the construct. The immediate aim of this study was therefore to find out whether lay people distinguish between the acceptance of apologies and forgiveness, and if they do, how they describe the acceptance of apologies.

## Method

We used semi-structured interviews designed to capture participants’ experiences of responding to apologies via their verbal descriptions. The core interview questions were as follows: i) *Tell me about a time in which you felt very offended by someone’s actions and received an apology from them* (they were asked prior to the interview to think of a situation); ii) *Did you accept the apology?*; iii) *What led you to accept or not accept the apology?*; iv) *Did you forgive?*; v) *Do you think there is a difference between accepting an apology and forgiving?*

## Participants

The sample consisted of 15 Australian participants (5 males; 10 females), aged between 18 and 60 years from a cross-section of socioeconomic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Sampling of participants ceased when we achieved data saturation (see Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Participants described conflicts with co-workers (4), friends (3), both co-workers and friends (1), family members (4) and intimate partners (3) and the wrongs ranged from inappropriate behaviour by colleagues to domestic abuse by partners and family members.

## Procedure and Analysis

We recruited participants through community networks and newspaper and online advertisements that invited people to take part in a study that explored their experience of receiving an apology in the context of an interpersonal conflict. The second author used a semi-structured format to interview participants and made audio recordings of the interviews that took between 30 to 60 minutes to complete. She asked further open questions depending on the participants' answers to clarify their descriptions and elicit further information. She thematically analysed the interview transcripts following the guidelines of Coffey and Atkinson (1996) to identify the main, core, and subthemes described by participants. The third and fourth authors individually reviewed her coding of these themes and at weekly meetings provided feedback that guided her to further refine them.

## Findings and Interpretation

Participants tended to use the terms acceptance and forgiveness interchangeably when they presented their initial scenarios, but 11 out of 13 participants indicated that the two concepts were different when the interviewer asked them about this. Two participants indicated that their religious perspective prevented them from distinguishing between the two constructs. We will briefly report the main themes that explain the difference between the two constructs and then report the themes we identified regarding what constitutes the acceptance of an apology. We will not report more data regarding what constitutes forgiveness because the theoretical underpinnings of the construct appear to be reasonably clear (see, e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006) and we did not find anything that added to that knowledge. The excerpts we provide in the following section are verbatim, but we did rectify some typographical errors.

### Forgiveness Versus Apology Acceptance

The analysis of the data reported by the 11 participants who distinguished between Forgiveness and Apology Acceptance revealed three main overlapping themes. The Perspective main theme reflects participants' view that forgiveness involved a broader perspective than acceptance.

[Forgiveness was] much more of a process... [whilst acceptance was] related to that event. So her way of saying sorry to how she behaved on that day, I accepted that. But to forgive her for that took me much longer because I needed to work out all of this other stuff (Participant [P] #8).

People might require more time to forgive because it is Complex in that it is "abstract" (P#12), "involved", and takes place "at a deeper level" (P#3) requiring them let go of their anger:

Forgiving means ... letting it go, and saying it's okay, what's done is done... it's complete. Wipe the slate clean, everything's okay, everything's back to normal (P#8).

The reference to letting go of anger leads into the Focus main theme that describes participants' view that forgiveness has a personal focus.

I think the apology is dependent on the person or how I perceive the person giving it, whereas forgiveness is pretty much all about me (P#5).

Forgiveness is therefore about the victim whilst the acceptance of an apology is about the relationship.

I think accepting an apology is a bit more of an interpersonal thing [about] your interaction with that person and ... whether you see that as appropriate or inappropriate. Forgiveness is more a personal thing and it's not necessarily about what that person said or how they responded to the situation (P#12).

## Apology Acceptance

Only two participants (P#1 & P#5) reported explicitly rejecting apologies and this low number is in accordance with what quantitative researchers found (see, e.g., [Bennett & Dewberry, 1994](#)). We therefore did not analyse the data separately but will refer to the relevant data where it sheds light on the acceptance themes.

Table 2

*Themes Identified With Respect to the Acceptance of Apologies*

Main theme
Core theme
Subtheme
Decision
Immediate
Protracted
Modify
Dialogue
Negotiate
Indicators
Apology
Components
Focus
Offender
Identity
Affiliation
Body Language
Knowledge
Offence
Severity
Intentionality
Types
Merit
Social Obligation
Relationship
Instrumental
Expedience
Closure
Levels
Internal
External
Behaviour
Verbal
Non-Verbal

The analysis of participants' responses regarding their acceptance of apologies revealed main themes with core and subordinate themes as reflected in [Table 2](#).

### Decision

Participants indicated that the time frame of the decision to accept apologies could be Immediate.

I was just completely shocked that she said it and that was completely enough. ... I didn't feel the need for more (P#4).

He apologised and I sort of accepted it at first (P#7).

They, however, also described it as a Protracted process.

You need time to process what's actually happened ... and this process can take ages. And for me, it took years (P#1).

Participants need this time to establish the full meaning and implications of what offenders said.

It [took a while to accept the apology] because I wasn't sure whether she meant it initially. Um and then I think, then I realised she did. When I say it took a while for me because, because it was so huge and because there was a lack of trust... Um but then once I thought about it, I thought well no I think, I think she did regret that and I think that was really hard for her (P#8).

Offenders' apologies moreover might not initially meet victims' requirements for an apology and they therefore need time to decide whether it is good enough. They might, however, sometimes Modify their decision to accept apologies and reconsider.

You might sort of think initially – oh yeah, that seems like a good apology, but then you start to think about the situation a little bit more and you kind of realise ... there's unanswered questions and ... maybe the apology wasn't really ... that genuine (P#2).

They might therefore eventually reject apologies.

... then after a few weeks I said I can't do this anymore. What are you still doing in my life? (P#7).

Participants therefore described acceptance as a Dialogue.

Acceptance of apology is more about an interpersonal dialogue and understanding that two people come together over the conflict situation (P#12).

They might use this dialogue to Negotiate improved apologies.

I think I wanted to probe the situation further because I wasn't satisfied with the superficial way in which it has been dealt with (P#2).

### Indicators

Three core themes reflect Indicators participants say they consider when they decide whether to accept or reject apologies.

Participants firstly looked at the specific features of the Apology itself and they particularly mentioned six themes (we call them Components) that are similar to the components and categories of apologies qualitative researchers have previously identified. [Slocum, Allan, and Allan \(2011\)](#), for instance, found that typically

apologies can be collapsed into three components with two categories each, namely Affirmation (acknowledgement of harm and/or admission of responsibility), Affect (expression of remorse and/or regret) and Action (reparation and/or restoration). Quantitative researchers have also identified these components and categories (e.g., Allan, McKillop, Dooley, Allan, & Preece, 2015; Ebesu Hubbard, Hendrickson, Fehrenbach, & Sur, 2013; Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Kirchhoff & Čehajić-Clancy, 2014; Pace et al., 2010).

Our participants described wanting apologisers to *Admit responsibility* for the harm in their apologies.

If you apologise for something it means you know you're in the wrong and you recognise that and you kind of think that you shouldn't have done that (P#13).

This admission should include acceptable explanations of the wrongful behaviour.

[The wrongdoer] could have kind of explained her behaviours rationally to me and actually apologised for her actions rather than apologising for something that actually wasn't what happened (P#12).

Victims further expect apologisers to *Acknowledge* they understand the impact the behaviour had on them.

I think also a genuine apology is a bit more extended ... [the person] is more likely to go into detail about how they felt you must have been feeling (P#2).

They also want offenders to express *Regret* or *Remorse* for their actions.

[He] apologised and let me know that he didn't feel too crash hot about what had happened ... I don't really know if I could ask more from him (P#15).

They indicated that offenders must promise *Not to repeat* the wrong behaviour.

An apology only means something if you're really sorry and you work towards not doing that something again (P#12).

They finally considered *Reparation* important.

I think if you were genuinely sorry you'd put a lot more effort into righting the wrong (P#5).

Participants secondly looked for a theme that we call Focus following other researchers who found that victims want offenders' apologies to focus on their needs (other-focused) and not solely on offenders' own needs (self-focused; Allan et al., 2015; Slocum et al., 2011). Participants found apologies acceptable if they were concentrated on the victim and how the wrong affected them, rather than the wrongdoer.

I honestly think it [the apology] was just something he said to try and make things easier for himself ... It wasn't so much an apology for hurting me, more that he felt bad that he had become what he hated (P#5).

The lack of *other focus* was the reason why one of the participants rejected an apology.

I think the apology was more about making himself feel better than anything else (P#5).

Participants also took different aspects of the Offender into account, including the offender's Identity.

I think it [the acceptance of an apology] is dependent on the person and how I perceive the person giving it ... it's a perception thing, whether I think it's genuine or not (P#5).

They particularly reported that they were more likely to accept an apology that came from someone with whom they had a close Affiliation.

The way I feel about a work situation and the way I feel about a personal situation, I think are different. If it was a friend [I] would be more willing to accept ... somebody I was close to. Whereas other people in your life you don't have to because you can cut them out if you want to (P#3).

This might be because participants find apologiser's Body Language informative and because they will be more familiar with that of people they know well.

I'd [pay attention to] body language – their voice and eyes, windows to the soul. You try and figure out the emotion that they are really feeling (P#14).

Participants indicated it was important that the apologiser's Body Language matches the verbal apology.

There was a little bit of emotion in her face, um so, ah I can't say that it was entirely disingenuous, I can't say that (P#2).

Participants' Knowledge of offenders help them assess apologies they received. They might accept less than perfect apologies when it was *untypical* for offenders to apologise.

I knew that she wasn't capable of apologising. And I knew that she wasn't capable of analysing her own behaviour in an objective fashion and I knew for some reason she would never take blame for anything so it [the apology] was quite a startling admission (P#4).

They might do so even when they realised that the words did not necessarily constitute an apology.

She would never come out and say "I'm sorry". So the words that she used to the effect that you know, it was she regretted that it had happened. I knew that that was her way of saying that she was sorry (P#8).

Participants also considered the *previous behaviour* of offenders.

[An apology] is sort of interplay between people. You judge people on their past behaviour, you judge people on how well meaning they are, you already have a judgement about someone and you could tell if it was just an oversight and they apologised... it was a miscommunication. Or you could tell if they didn't have your best interests at heart and you don't trust them anyway (P#4).

The final indicator was their perception of the Offence. They firstly considered the Severity thereof.

The scale of what he'd done ... to come back and act like it was all normal and good ... it's just a bit of an insult (P#11).

The perceived Intentionality of the offence, however, also shaped their decision to accept or reject apologies.

I think it [acceptance] also comes down to the actual act itself. Whether the act was significant enough to cause harm ... [and] the intent and how long it went (P#5).

These findings are consistent with previous quantitative research by Bennett and Dewberry (1994) who found in a vignette study that greater offence severity and higher levels of offender responsibility (i.e., intentionality) increased the victims' desire to reject the apology.

## Types

Participants distinguished between four types of acceptance. Participants reported accepting apologies purely on their Merit.

It was so overwhelming that she'd even given me that much, I didn't feel the need for more (P#4).

The Social Obligation core theme reflects some participants' views that "if you don't accept an apology it's very abrupt and a little bit rude" (P#9).

[Accepting an apology is] the socially acceptable thing to do, if someone makes an apology. ... whether you think that apology's genuine, or ... that an apology is ever going to be acceptable after that event, that's a different matter (P#3).

The Relationship core theme indicates that people accept apologies because they desired to maintain their relationships with apologiser.

[I] just wanted to continue the relationship but then I know I wasn't genuine in accepting the apology... (P#1).

This appears to happen across various relationships.

Work things tend to be a little bit more like you want to keep harmony. I suppose you have to keep harmony so there's more pressure on you to accept that apology just to keep a working relationship. I guess in some regards that can be the same in family, if they're really close. Like you sometimes accept apologies just to keep the peace. Whereas other people in your life you don't have to because you can cut them out if you want to (P#3).

The Instrumental core theme reflects that victims might be looking even broader when they decide whether or not to accept an apology. The Expedience subtheme reflects participants' reports that they sometimes accept the apologies because it is the easiest option.

I went along with it. Nodded and smiled because it was easier [to accept the apology] (P#12).

Others accepted apologies to achieve Closure from the event.

I wanted answers as well. I wanted to know why and I wanted to know what was going through his head at the time basically. So in accepting it, I was trying to find out, I was trying to get closure as well to the whole situation (P#7).

## Levels

The Levels main theme includes the Internal and External core themes, which reflect participants' appreciation that their External decision to accept apologies could be incongruent with their actual Internal feelings.

I didn't really accept it ... But I accepted it for the intent of moving on... (P#14).

One participant summarised the internal-external duality of acceptance by saying:

You can say there is two levels of accepting an apology ... because externally and interpersonally I've accepted it, but I really haven't (P#12).

## Behaviour

Participants distinguished between Verbal and Non-Verbal behaviour when communicating their acceptance of apologies. Those reporting Verbal behaviour, however, tended to be vague regarding what exactly they said.

I mean, I probably could have acknowledged it, you know, verbally in some way um what I would have said exactly though I don't know. I might have said ... well, you know, I do appreciate you saying that (P#2).

Verbal acceptance behaviour might therefore rather be indirect language such as “by acknowledging we all stuff up” (P#5) or giving similar messages.

I said that we could hang out and be friends again. See how everything goes and whatever (P#7).

Only two participants rejected apologies, so little (if any) weight can be placed on what they said, but one of them appeared to have explicitly rejected the apology.

I think it was quite obvious [that I didn't accept the apology] with my verbal reaction (P#5).

The other described how she expressed her rejection verbally by continuing to challenge the apologisee and re-raising the issue of the offence.

I wasn't satisfied with the superficial way in which it had been dealt with. I wanted to get to the root reason why this had come about ... (P#2).

Participants more often referred to Non-Verbal acceptance behaviour by “nodding and smiling” (P#12) during the apology interaction or afterwards hugging offenders.

I think just me hugging her she would have known [I accepted the apology] because we'd never hugged and never had that kind of relationship (P#8).

They also reported Non-Verbally communicating their acceptance of apologies by continuing their interaction with offenders.

I kinda did [accept the apology] because ... I started talking to him again. ... Just whatever I did before. It was just normal (P#11).

They also reported demonstrating Non-Verbal acceptance behaviour by desisting from raising the offence during conversations with offenders.

Well I didn't question her further ... I just I didn't challenge her further... I didn't enter into any further debate or challenge her justifications so I guess there's an assumption there that I've accepted her apology and ... it just was unspoken (P#12).

## Discussion

The immediate purpose of this study was to find out if lay people make a distinction between the acceptance of apologies and forgiveness, and how they describe the process of accepting apologies. The findings indicate that our lay participants did not spontaneously distinguish between acceptance of apologies and forgiveness and sometimes appeared to confuse the two constructs, but they made a clear distinction between them when explicitly asked whether they differ. They reported that forgiveness had a broader perspective than merely the

interpersonal relationship between the offender and victim and was more complex and focussed primarily on the victim, not the relationship. This interpretation is consistent with previous research that suggests forgiveness is a complex transformational and personal process (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000) that involves affective, behavioural, and cognitive changes (e.g., Lawler-Row et al., 2008; Newberg, d'Aquili, Newberg, & deMarici, 2000). Our participants found it more difficult to verbalise their understanding of the acceptance of apologies and our analysis of their descriptions revealed five distinct main themes, namely Decision, Indicator, Types, Levels, and Behaviour (refer to Table 2).

We believe we can use contemporary neuro-scientific and cognitive (neuro-cognitive) theories and findings from apology research to weave these themes together into a preliminary theoretical explanation of the apology acceptance stage of Goffman's (1955, 1971) model. Such a preliminary theoretical formulation will advance progress towards the ultimate aim, which is to develop a well-specified theoretical understanding of the acceptance construct, define it, and to understand how it moderates the relationship between apologies and forgiveness in the corrective interchange.

## Neuro-Cognitive Theories

Researchers are increasingly using neuro-cognitive theories to explain social and moral decision-making and behaviour (see e.g., Allan, 2017; Greene, 2009; Paxton & Greene, 2010; Reynolds, 2006). Neuro-cognitive researchers conceptualise the brain as a network (see, e.g., Anderson, 2010, 2016; Bullmore & Sporns, 2009; Rumelhart, Smolensky, McClelland, & Hinton, 1986) consisting of several cognitive and emotional neural systems. They therefore understand brain activities such as deciding about, and responding to, apologies as the products of complex and multidimensional interactions that take place between these systems. They postulate that brains' synaptic connections allow them to operate as networks because they form physical patterns of neural electrochemical units (called *prototypes*) for objects or impressions (e.g., acceptable behaviour) similar to what other psychologists might call schemas, or scripts (Reynolds, 2006). These prototypes are neural representations that hold descriptive, evaluative, and prescriptive sub-conceptual (i.e., non-symbolic) information (Smolensky, 1988). People develop prototypes non-consciously from childhood (see, e.g., Churchland, 1996, 1998; Narvaez, 2008) through experience and thus learn what the appropriate responses to apologies are in their culture (see, e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1989). A prototype must represent something and people can therefore have a prototype for a dog, for instance, but not for a non-dog (i.e., negation; see, e.g., MacDonald & Just, 1989; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). People constantly use their prototypes to analyse incoming stimuli and make instantaneous non-conscious decisions and act on them. People might also use these prototypes to make delayed conscious decisions, but they tend to make decisions non-consciously where possible because that is the most optimal use of their limited cognitive resources (Lieberman, Gaunt, Gilbert, & Trope, 2002). They moreover likely use different neural systems for conscious and non-conscious decisions (see, e.g., Mega, Gigerenzer, & Volz, 2015). People also often behave differently from their stated intentions (FeldmanHall et al., 2012; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) and a possible explanation is that they use different neural systems for decision-making and behaving (Francis et al., 2016).

## Preliminary Theoretical Explanation

Neuro-cognitive research confirms Goffman's (1955, 1971) assumption that people feel wronged when offenders violate social norms (Rilling & Sanfey, 2011; Sanfey, 2007) and might react negatively (see, e.g.,

Pietrini, Guazzelli, Basso, Jaffe, & Grafman, 2000; Strang, Utikal, Fischbacher, Weber, & Falk, 2014). Victims might therefore take revenge (for a discussion see McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2013; Tripp & Bies, 1997) unless they can find another way of repairing the ruptured relationships, such as by forgiving and/or reconciling with offenders. Researchers therefore find that both victims and offenders typically want to resolve their differences (see, e.g., Schlenker & Darby, 1981) and that victims expect offenders to begin the corrective interchange by apologising (Fischbacher & Utikal, 2013). Offenders' attempts to apologise can be conceptualised as stimuli that victims must process and make decisions about that then leads to behaviour, even though it might be barely perceptible.

The Decision main theme suggests victims make decisions about stimuli they perceive in two ways. The Immediate core theme reflects our participants' reports that they mostly make quick, automatic, and uncritical decisions to accept apologies and this is in accordance with other research (see, e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Risen & Gilovich, 2007). The neuro-cognitive explanation for this is that the stimuli they received met their *prototype* of acceptable apologies. The Protracted core theme, however, recognises participants' reports that they sometimes take time to consciously consider the acceptability of the apology stimuli they receive (also see Slocum et al., 2011) or reconsider their initial quick acceptance of apologies. Victims consciously consider stimuli that do not meet their prototype for an acceptable apology by seeking more information (see, e.g., Lieberman et al., 2002) and this might lead to a delayed acceptance. Their conscious consideration of stimuli might, however, also lead them to change their initial decisions to accept them and therefore reject them (Modify subtheme). The Dialogue subtheme reflects participants' views that the apology and its acceptance are part of an interpersonal exchange between victims and offenders, and might involve an exchange of thoughts and feelings (see, e.g., Allan, Strickland, & Allan, 2017). Participants reported that they might consciously delay making a decision in an attempt to find out more or because they were unsatisfied. We are not aware of specific quantitative support for the Negotiate subtheme but researchers have pointed out that victims' ability to accept or reject apologies gives them the power to negotiate strategically desirable goals (e.g., Doak, 2011), such as receive a better apology (see, e.g., Allan et al., 2017).

Victims use prototypes of acceptable apologies in their decision making and, from a neuro-cognitive perspective, the Indicator main theme (and specifically the Apology, Offender, and Offence core themes) possibly sheds light on what the content of the prototypes might be. There is research that supports the Apology core themes, namely the Component (e.g., Allan, McKillop, Dooley, Allan, & Preece, 2015; Ebesu Hubbard, Hendrickson, Fehrenbach, & Sur, 2013; Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Kirchhoff & Čehajić-Clancy, 2014; Pace et al., 2010) and Focus (e.g., Allan et al., 2015; Slocum et al., 2011) subthemes. Quantitative researchers' findings also provide support for the Severity and Intentionality Subthemes we identified. Bennett and Earwaker (1994), for example, found that recipients of apologies were more likely to reject them when they perceived the offence to be more intentional and more severe.

The Types main theme reflects participants' insight that they sometimes accept apologies in order to meet their Social Obligations; maintain their Relationships; or achieve other Instrumental outcomes (for a similar finding, see Allan et al., 2014). Victims' prototypes of acceptable apologies therefore do not necessarily predict whether they will accept apologies that match them. The Levels (External and Internal) and Behaviour (Verbal and Non-Verbal) main themes furthermore indicate that victims' external behaviour might not accurately reflect their internal decisions. There might be several explanations for this, but one from a neuro-cognitive perspective is

that people's conscious and non-conscious decisions (see, e.g., [Mega et al., 2015](#)) and their behaviour ([Francis et al., 2016](#)) are the products of different neural systems.

## Limitations, Implications, and Future Research

The qualitative method we used limits generalisation from our findings and we realise that our use of interviews would have encouraged participants to focus on the decision-making processes they were conscious of. Our findings are therefore most likely to reflect participants' post hoc explanations of their non-conscious decision-making (see, e.g., [Kuhn, 1991](#); [Nisbett & Wilson, 1977](#)). Their reports, however, fit in very well with neuro-cognitive theories (e.g., that decision-making often takes place non-consciously, see, e.g., [Evans, 2008](#)) and quantitative research findings on apologies (see, e.g., [Darby & Schlenker, 1989](#); [Smith & Harris, 2012](#)).

Our participants' reports indicate they are capable of distinguishing between acceptance and forgiveness when specifically asked to do so although they might not generally see the acceptance of apology as a discrete stage in the corrective interchange. There is, however, quantitative (see [Allan et al., 2014](#); [Dhimi, 2012](#); [Kirchhoff & Čehajić-Clancy, 2014](#)) support that acceptance of an apology is distinct from forgiveness. A first step for future quantitative research might be to further explore how acceptance and forgiveness differ, and how certain indicators might influence the decision to accept an apology differently from the decision to forgive.

Researchers studying apology as a psychological mechanism that might promote forgiveness should moreover recognise that the interchange process is often more complex than what [Goffman \(1955, 1971\)](#) and some other researchers' observations suggest. Our interpretation of our qualitative findings is that the acceptance of apologies will often be a non-conscious and quick linear process, but that it can also be a complex process. Victims might be constrained by social and cultural norms about interpersonal relations, which can lead to various types and levels of acceptance. Victims' behaviour that suggests they accepted apologies might therefore not accurately reflect their decisions, and this might explain the high rate of acceptance of apologies reported in some studies (e.g., [Dhimi, 2012](#); [Shapland et al., 2006, 2007](#)).

Our qualitative findings provide the foundation for researchers to better understand the complex workings of the corrective interchange, and explore the variables that might influence the important relationship between apologies and forgiveness. Our data do not, however, allow researchers planning to study the relationship between apologies and forgiveness to formulate specific hypotheses to test and they should therefore develop a comprehensive and well-specified theory of the apology acceptance process. Researchers could use several psychological theories to explore the acceptance of apologies in the context of real life transgressions, but we for purposes of this paper chose to interpret our findings within a neuro-scientific theory. We anticipate a theory of acceptance that incorporates contemporary neuro-scientific knowledge of social and moral decision-making would allow researchers to consider using techniques like prototype analysis (see, e.g., [Fehr, 1988](#); [Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015](#)), and to examine the acceptance process outside of conscious awareness using brain imaging methodologies such as fMRI (see [Strang et al., 2014](#)).

## Funding

The authors have no funding to report.

## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Acknowledgments

The authors have no support to report.

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