

## The Acceptance of Apologies in the Corrective Process: Implications for Research and Practice

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### Abstract

Apology scholars and researchers in psychology, law, and justice commonly conceptualise the corrective process that follows wrongful behaviour as an apology-followed-by-forgiveness sequence. In this paper, however, we suggest on the basis of our analysis of the research literature that a more suitable conceptualisation of the corrective process is one that includes the *acceptance of an apology* as an additional discrete step that is distinct from forgiveness. We begin with a brief discussion of the psychological view of apologies as a process of negotiation between offending and offended parties, and how psychologists conceive peoples' responses to apologies. We also review the psychological literature to determine how psychologists define the acceptance of an apology and how they view it within the corrective process. We then briefly examine how the outcome of forgiveness is commonly used as a restorative ideal in the context of restorative justice conferencing and suggest that assessing instead the *acceptance of an apology* may be more appropriate in this setting. We conclude the paper with a brief agenda for further research.

### Key words

Apology; apology acceptance; corrective process; forgiveness; law; mediation; restorative justice

### Resumen

Habitualmente, los académicos que estudian las disculpas y los investigadores en psicología, derecho y justicia conceptualizan el proceso correctivo que sigue a un comportamiento ilegal como una secuencia disculpa-seguida-de-perdón. Este

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artículo, sin embargo, se sugiere, a partir del análisis de literatura científica, que sería más adecuado realizar una conceptualización del proceso correctivo incluyendo la aceptación de una disculpa como un paso diferente adicional que es distinto del perdón. En primer lugar se trata de forma breve la visión de las disculpas como un proceso de negociación entre víctimas y victimarios, y cómo conciben los psicólogos las respuestas de la gente ante las disculpas. También se analiza la literatura sobre psicología para determinar cómo definen los psicólogos la aceptación de una disculpa y cómo la ven dentro del proceso correctivo. A continuación se investiga brevemente cómo se usa comúnmente el resultado del perdón como un ideal restaurativo en el ámbito de la justicia restaurativa, y sugiere en su lugar evaluar si la aceptación de una disculpa podría ser más apropiada en este contexto. El artículo finaliza con una breve agenda de futuras investigaciones.

**Palabras clave**

Disculpas; aceptación de disculpas; proceso correctivo; perdón; derecho; mediación; justicia restaurativa

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## 1. The acceptance of apologies in the corrective process: implications for research and practice

Victims generally want apologies (see, e.g., Gallagher *et al.* 2003) and wrongdoers often use apologies to account for their behaviour by acknowledging the offending act, expressing remorse, and, if appropriate, repairing the relationship with the victim or offended group (Schneider 2000). Scholars therefore believe that apologies can have potential benefits for both victims and wrongdoers (see, e.g., Gold and Weiner 2000, Tabak *et al.* 2012) and there is theoretical support for this belief (see, e.g., Allan *et al.* 2017). Legislators therefore increasingly encourage, and sometimes even require, wrongdoers to offer apologies to their victims as a mechanism aimed at repairing or restoring the relationships between them (Allan 2007, 2008, Vines 2007, Carroll 2010). The function of apologies in resolving disputes is well-documented (see, e.g., Petrucci 2002, Robbennolt 2013) and take place despite concerns that apologies may be regarded as admissions of fault and therefore increase liability (Vines 2005, Robbennolt 2006, Allan 2007, Allan and Munro 2008, Carroll 2010).

Legislators who introduce apologies appear to be guided, at least implicitly, by Goffman's (1955, 1972) description of the social ritual that parties to a wrong engage in to remedy the social damage caused by an offence. He postulated that after a wrong is committed a corrective interchange takes place that consists of four discrete stages during which victims typically *challenge or reproach* wrongdoers and wrongdoers offer *accounts explaining their behaviour*, which victims *accept* and *express gratitude* for. This dialogical exchange requires offenders<sup>1</sup> to account for their behaviour and an apology is one form of account they can offer to victims. Goffman (1955, 1972) focussed on the social aspects of the corrective interchange and also described the corrective process as a predictable sequence in which a positive response like forgiveness automatically and directly follows an apology.

Allan *et al.* (2017), however, point out that both victims and offenders also experience wrongs at an *interpersonal* and *personal* level, and they and other authors (see, e.g., Doak 2011, Lazare 2004) describe the corrective interchange as a negotiation process during which victims and offenders address their needs at all three of these levels. The initial statement of apology (e.g., saying sorry) therefore marks the start of a longer bi-directional process during which victims and offenders try to achieve specific outcomes (Doak 2011).

Martin (2015), based on her analysis of qualitative data, moreover proposed that *responding* to apologies is not a discrete event, but a process in which the receiver evaluates the apology and then decides how to respond to it. She found, specifically, that receivers of apologies take into account characteristics of the apology, the offender, and the offence itself when deciding how to respond. Further, her analysis suggested that people can alter their initial response to an apology based on their continuing appraisal of these characteristics and ongoing negotiations or experiences with the apologiser. Her findings are in line with research that suggests people take into account factors such as the intentionality of the offence (see, e.g., Struthers *et al.* 2008), the relationship between themselves and the offender (see, e.g., Finkel *et al.* 2002), and the timing of the apology (see, e.g., Frantz and Bennigson 2005) when they decide how to respond to apologies. Our focus in this paper is on how victims respond to apologies they receive.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms *offender* and *wrongdoer* interchangeably throughout this paper.

## 2. The victim's response to the apology

Apologies are usually considered most effective when they result in the victim forgiving the wrongdoer because forgiveness<sup>2</sup> is associated with positive relational, psychological, and health outcomes (see, e.g., Coyle and Enright 1997, Lawler-Row *et al.* 2008, Gordon *et al.* 2009). Scholars and researchers such as Okimoto and Wenzel (2008) therefore frequently write about "a three-step dialogical exchange where the victim demands an apology, the offender apologizes, and the *victim expresses forgiveness*" (Okimoto and Wenzel 2008, p. 310, emphasis added). This three-stage sequence makes intuitive sense and it has, at least implicitly, been the dominant theoretical model of the corrective process used by researchers since research in this area started. Heider (1958), for example, implied such an apology-followed-by-forgiveness sequence by suggesting that granting forgiveness (or not) is the only available option after an apology is given. Researchers commonly assume such an apology-forgiveness sequence when they explore how the use of apologies can facilitate forgiveness (see, e.g., Philpot and Hornsey 2008, Fehr and Gelfand 2010, Wohl *et al.* 2012).

Some scholars do, however, at least by implication, suggest that another discrete stage must take place prior to forgiveness, namely that the recipient must accept the apology (see, e.g., Takaku *et al.* 2001, Hayes 2006, Shapland *et al.* 2007, Hayes and Hayes 2008, Martin 2015). Takaku (2001, p. 496), for example, says that "the offender must start the process of conflict resolution by apologizing, [and] the victim must decide to accept the offender's apology if the transaction is to be completed successfully...". Dhami (2015, p. 111) similarly states that "the recipient may accept the apology fully, accept it conditionally or reject it". Kirchhoff *et al.* (2012, p. 110) furthermore contend that accepting an apology can "pave the way to forgiveness", suggesting acceptance of an apology is a step that occurs prior to forgiveness and before the victim is ready to forgive.

It makes intuitive sense that an apology must first be accepted before forgiveness can be granted. Inferring an apology-followed-by-forgiveness model of the corrective process like that described by Okimoto and Wenzel (2008), however, indicates that some researchers and practitioners<sup>3</sup> believe that recipients accept apologies through the process of forgiveness (see Hayes 2006). Some scholars such as the philosopher Smith (2008, p. 137), though, question "whether we should think of accepting an apology as synonymous with forgiveness", or if it is something different. Kador (2009, p. 216) asserts more strongly that acceptance of an apology is distinct from forgiveness, and claims that while "forgiveness is often related to apology, [...] it is something else [from acceptance] entirely". Moreover, Kirchhoff *et al.* (2012, p. 115) state that "despite having forgiveness as its ultimate goal, the receiver of an apology can accept the apologetic utterance but is in no way required to forgive the offender". Our cursory examination of the literature, however, suggests that researchers and practitioners still commonly use the level of forgiveness as a principal measure of the success of apologies (see, e.g., Bachman and Guerrero 2006, Bono and McCullough 2006, Hornsey and Wohl 2013), which is not surprising because forgiveness is a well-established construct and can easily be measured empirically (see, e.g., Subkoviak *et al.* 1995, Dorn *et al.* 2014).

There therefore appears to be a level of conceptual confusion regarding whether empirical researchers view the acceptance of an apology as a discrete step in the corrective process, and if they do, how they conceptualise it. There also appears to

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<sup>2</sup> We follow Wenzel and Okimoto (2009) and define forgiveness here as the transformation of motives, from hostile emotions and a desire for revenge to a more positive and prosocial orientation toward the offender (for a detailed review of the forgiveness construct, see Fincham *et al.* 2006).

<sup>3</sup> We use the term *practitioner* broadly throughout to refer to those who have an interest in the apology-forgiveness sequence in applied settings, including psychologists, lawyers, and mediators/facilitators of processes such as victim-offender mediation.

be inconsistency among researchers and practitioners about whether the acceptance of an apology and forgiveness should be considered separate responses to an apology. Understanding the relationship and possible difference between these two responses to an apology has important implications for the way the outcomes of apologies are conceived and measured. We will in the following section present a short review of the psychological literature that aimed to identify how psychologists define the acceptance of an apology and how they view it as part of the corrective process.

### 3. A review of empirical literature on the acceptance of apologies

We reviewed in this section the empirical studies that used the *acceptance of an apology* as either a predictor variable or an outcome measure of an apology. Our aim was to determine how the authors of these studies define the acceptance of an apology, but also to see if they make a distinction between apology acceptance and forgiveness when they measure peoples' responses to apologies. We found 17 studies that used the acceptance of an apology as a variable (i.e., Bennett and Dewberry 1994, Bennett and Earwaker 1994, Risen and Gilovich 2007, Kampf 2008, Ohbuchi *et al.* 2008, Harth *et al.* 2011, Coombs and Holladay 2012, Dhimi 2012, Kirchhoff *et al.* 2012, Walfisch *et al.* 2013, Allan *et al.* 2014, Cerulo and Ruane 2014, Chiles and Roloff 2014, Kirchhoff and Čehajić-Clancy 2014, Barlow *et al.* 2015, Dhimi 2015, Wohl *et al.* 2015). We begin by discussing how researchers defined and/or described the acceptance of an apology.

#### 3.1. Definition of the acceptance of apologies

We did not find an established and clear definition of the acceptance of an apology, but most authors provided enough information or context for us to determine how they conceptualised apology acceptance and its place in the corrective process. Researchers generally either write about acceptance of an apology as a *discrete step* in the corrective process or appear to *conflate it with forgiveness*; we provide excerpts below to support our interpretations.

##### 3.1.1. Acceptance of the apology as a discrete step

We found that researchers who conceptualised the acceptance of an apology broadly as a discrete step fall into three categories. First, some researchers (see Coombs and Holladay 2012, Allan *et al.* 2014, Kirchhoff and Čehajić-Clancy 2014) implied that the acceptance of an apology indicates the receiver finds it to be *acceptable* or an *effective* response to the offence. They therefore suggest apologies are accepted when receivers are satisfied with the apology and perceive it as complete or containing everything they wanted from the apology (Kirchhoff and Čehajić-Clancy 2014). Coombs and Holladay (2012, p. 290), for example, stated that "acceptance of the apology is like account acceptance in the crisis response literature [and that] it signals receivers find the response to be effective".

Second, some researchers (see Harth *et al.* 2011, Dhimi 2012, Chiles and Roloff 2014) implied that the acceptance of an apology is an expression by the receiver that he or she acknowledges the apology and is now *willing to move on* towards forgiveness or restoration. Chiles and Roloff (2014, p. 66), for example, state that "when the target of an apology accepts the offer, he or she is communicating to some degree a willingness to move on...". Moreover, Dhimi (2012, p. 54) suggested that when people accept apologies they "[express] a desire to move on/put the past behind [them]". These researchers may therefore see accepting an apology as a symbolic gesture of reconciliation whereby receivers acknowledge the apology and signal their readiness to enter the path of social exchange towards reparation.

Third, other researchers (see Bennett and Dewberry 1994, Kirchhoff *et al.* 2012, Dhimi 2015, Wohl *et al.* 2015) implied similarly that the acceptance of an apology

is an *initial step* in the corrective process that is distinct from, and may occur prior to, forgiveness. Dhimi (2015, p. 111), for instance, implies acceptance is an initial direct response to an apology when she states “the recipient may accept the apology fully, accept it conditionally or reject it”. Kirchhoff *et al.* (2012, p. 110) also state that apologies can be “accepted and pave the way to forgiveness or even to reconciliation”. A step-wise conceptualisation of apology acceptance in the corrective process has a basis in the theoretical literature and makes intuitive sense. Petrucci (2002 p. 342), for instance, states that “a believable apology leads to acceptance, which can then result in forgiveness”, and explicitly describes an “[apology]-acceptance-forgiveness-restoration process” (Petrucci 2002, p. 343). Hayes and Hayes (2008, p. 370) describe a similar corrective process wherein “offenders apologize, their apologies are accepted, [and] victims offer forgiveness...”.

Despite differences between each of the above three conceptualisations of apology acceptance, there are similarities between them. Namely, each seems to suggest that the acceptance of an apology is a *performative action* in direct response to the apology, that is, an immediate behavioural choice about how the receiver responds to the apology. We consider this distinct from forgiveness, which is typically defined as a longer-term emotional process that involves several affective and psychological changes in the forgiver and the foregoing of resentment towards the offender (McCullough *et al.* 2000). Forgiveness may therefore be a *final* outcome of the corrective interchange, whereas accepting the apology may be an intermediary step (see, e.g., Kirchhoff *et al.* 2012). We do, however, consider it inappropriate at this stage to conclude that a simple difference between the two responses is that apology acceptance is a discrete, immediate response whereas forgiveness is a longer process, because the decision to accept or reject an apology may also be a process in which respondents evaluate various critical factors. Nonetheless, our current understanding is that accepting an apology appears to be a more event- and apology-focused response than forgiveness, which is often tied into factors external to the event and apology itself, such as the relationship with the offender (Finkel *et al.* 2002).

### 3.1.2. Acceptance of the apology conflated with forgiveness

There were some researchers, however, who conflated acceptance of the apology and forgiveness either through the context of the study (see, e.g., Ohbuchi *et al.* 2008, Cerulo and Ruane 2014) or by using the terms interchangeably (see, e.g., Kampf 2008, Coombs and Holladay 2012). They therefore did not explicitly view the acceptance of apologies as a discrete stage in the corrective process; however, this was probably due more to unawareness of the difference between the two responses (and the importance of making the distinction) rather than deliberate contention. Coombs and Holladay (2012, p. 286), for instance, claim that “accepting an apology is taken as a sign of forgiveness [while] rejecting an apology indicates a lack of forgiveness”, even though they appeared to measure acceptance of the apology as something distinct from forgiveness by specifically enquiring about apology acceptance. Chiles and Roloff (2014, p. 66) also appear to conflate apology acceptance and forgiveness when they state that “because accepted apologies to some degree bring a negative event to a close [...], rejected apologies imply that the action has not been forgiven...”.

Our review suggests there is indeed conceptual confusion around the acceptance of an apology and its role in the corrective process, and the way researchers describe apology acceptance seems to vary. There is, however, at least by implication, a general sense in the literature that the acceptance of an apology is a discrete stage in the corrective process that is distinct from forgiveness. What is striking is the lack of attention given by researchers to defining the process of apology acceptance or explaining how it is actually different from forgiveness. We therefore in the following section present the findings of researchers who measured the acceptance

of an apology and forgiveness as separate responses, and who suggest there may be empirical differences between the two responses.

### 3.2. *Acceptance of an apology as a separate response from forgiveness*

Five of the studies we reviewed examined acceptance of the apology and forgiveness as distinct constructs by providing them to participants as separate response options and/or analysing them separately. Two of these studies (see Kirchhoff *et al.* 2012, Walfisch *et al.* 2013), however, took measurements of apology acceptance and forgiveness separately, but then combined the results into an aggregate measure of apology effectiveness and did not report the two measurements as separate outcomes. The authors of the remaining three studies (see Dhami 2012, Allan *et al.* 2014, Kirchhoff and Čehajić-Clancy 2014) did measure the acceptance of an apology and forgiveness separately and reported actual differences between the two responses, suggesting they may be distinct constructs; we briefly present their findings below.

Dhami's (2012) analyses of victim-offender mediation case files, for instance, led her to conclude that victims accepted apologies in over 90% of cases, but granted forgiveness in only 19% of cases. She reported the acceptance of apologies was statistically unrelated to forgiveness, which she states "underscores the crucial distinction between these two responses to apology" (Dhami 2012, p. 57). Moreover, Kirchhoff and Čehajić-Clancy (2014) measured acceptance of an apology and forgiveness separately and found that manipulating the various components of the apology (e.g., whether or not it included an admission of responsibility or an offer of forbearance) had a greater influence on the participants' acceptance of the apology than on forgiveness. Allan *et al.* (2014) similarly found that the focus of the apology (i.e., whether it is self-focused or other-focused) significantly affected whether the receiver accepted the apology, but not whether they forgave the offender. The findings by Allan *et al.* (2014) and Kirchhoff and Čehajić-Clancy (2014) are noteworthy because they not only suggest apology acceptance and forgiveness are distinct constructs, but that certain factors may affect the acceptance of an apology differently from forgiveness of the offender.

#### 3.2.1. Implications for practice

The aforementioned findings challenge the dominant apology-followed-by-forgiveness sequence because they suggest the acceptance of an apology is a discrete step in the corrective process and may therefore be an alternative way to respond to an apology, either before or instead of forgiveness. While it is still not clear how exactly the acceptance of an apology differs from forgiveness, this distinction has implications for how researchers measure the outcomes of apologies and how mediators assess the success of apologies. When apologies are used in legal or dispute resolution settings, lawyers and mediators should therefore be aware of the difference between accepting an apology and forgiving the apologiser. A real-world setting in which the traditional apology-forgiveness sequence is apparent is restorative justice, where apology and forgiveness are seen as central concepts (see, e.g., Blecher 2011); it is moreover a setting in which making the distinction between the *acceptance of an apology* and the *forgiveness of the offender* may be valuable.

## 4. Restorative justice

Restorative justice is seen as an alternative to the adversarial justice system and involves victim-focused practices such as victim-offender mediation and youth justice conferencing, which serve as a diversion from the traditional court system (Daly 2002a). Conferences<sup>4</sup> enable a dialogue between the affected parties (i.e.,

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<sup>4</sup> We hereinafter use *conferences* or *restorative conferences* to refer to all forms of mediation and conferencing in restorative justice



victims, offenders, and their supporters) and are used to facilitate a negotiation towards a mutually agreeable resolution to repair the harm caused by the offence (Braithwaite 2002). Moreover, conferences provide offenders with an opportunity to apologise for the offending act, and provide victims with an opportunity to, ideally, forgive the offender (Blecher 2011).

#### 4.1. *The restorative ideal in restorative justice*

There is no outcome measure that can provide, by itself, a universal indicator of the success of a restorative conference, and the perceived success of a conference is likely dependent on what the affected parties want to achieve from the encounter (Shapland *et al.* 2007). Nonetheless, the wrongdoer's apology and the victim's act of forgiveness are seen as a core sequence of the restorative process (Retzinger and Scheff 1996, Blecher 2011). Researchers and practitioners in restorative justice therefore often speak of a *restorative ideal* in which the encounter (e.g., the conference) results in the offering of an apology by the offender<sup>5</sup> and the granting of forgiveness by the victim (see, e.g., Strang 2001, Sherman *et al.* 2005, Hayes and Hayes 2008). This restorative ideal is reflected in what some call the apology-forgiveness social script, which dictates that when people receive apologies they are expected to complete the corrective process by granting forgiveness (see, e.g., Darby and Schlenker 1989, Bennett and Dewberry 1994, Choi and Severson 2009, Struthers *et al.* 2014). Some scholars even suggest that restorative conferences are characterised by an apology-forgiveness *ritual* in which the successful completion of this sequence yields therapeutic benefits to both the victim and the offender (see, e.g., Blecher 2011).

Stakeholders of restorative conferences (i.e., victims, offenders, and mediators) agree that conferences are fairer than adversarial court processes (Hayes 2006), and participants are generally satisfied with the outcomes of conferences (see, e.g., Hayes and Hayes 2008, Dhimi 2012). There is, however, little evidence that such conferences are in fact restorative, that is, that they actually achieve the restorative ideal of forgiveness (see, e.g., Daly 2002b, Hayes and Hayes 2008, Blecher 2011). The Reintegrative Shaming Experiments conducted in Canberra, Australia from 1995 to 2000, for example, revealed that only 40 – 50% of offenders received forgiveness (see Hayes 2006). In the South Australian Juvenile Justice study conducted from 1998 to 2001, forgiveness was observed in only 34% of cases (Daly 2002b). Shapland *et al.* (2006) also reported that expressed statements of forgiveness were rare in restorative encounters, but argued many victims instead implied a degree of *accepting the apology* through symbolic gestures. Similarly, Dhimi (2012) found that victims granted forgiveness in only 19% of victim-offender mediation cases even though victims *accepted* offenders' apologies in over 90% of cases.

Hayes and Hayes (2008, p. 384) acknowledge that the restorative ideal of forgiveness is realised in the minority of cases, which they suggest "may signal a shortcoming of restorative justice conferences in achieving restoration, especially if a successful restorative justice process is defined as one that achieves the 'core sequence' of apology-forgiveness". We, following Hayes and Hayes (2008), see the failure of restorative conferences to achieve the restorative ideal as a shortcoming not of the process of restorative justice itself, but rather in how the success of conferences is often defined, that is, by achieving forgiveness. Most of the existing research might therefore have done a disservice to the voices of victims by conceiving the restorative process in a way that precludes responding to an apology with something other than the option of forgiveness.

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<sup>5</sup> Although apologies are considered part of the core sequence in restorative conferences, apologies are not always offered by wrongdoers. For the sake of this paper, however, our subsequent discussion applies to cases in which apologies have been offered.

#### 4.2. A challenge of the restorative ideal

Daly (2002b) proposed that a gap exists between the theory and practice of restorative justice that we believe is apparent in the failure of restorative justice to achieve the restorative ideal of forgiveness. Forgiveness, which is often a very personal process for the victim, may be an impractical, even unethical (see Johnstone 2011), goal in real-world restorative conferences because while theoretically ideal, it is unfair to expect victims to forgive offenders for the harm done after a single restorative encounter (see Stubbs 2007, Doak 2011). Researchers typically view forgiveness as a complex transformational process of healing that is internal to the victim and involves affective, cognitive, and behavioural changes (Newberg *et al.* 2000). It therefore unfolds gradually over time and generally requires information about the intent of the harm (e.g., Girard *et al.* 2002) and the communication of guilt and shame from the offender (e.g., Hareli and Eisikovits 2006). It is unlikely, then, that the psychological complexities of forgiveness can be achieved in such a time-constrained context as a single restorative conference (Dzur and Wertheimer 2002, Doak 2011).

Dzur and Wertheimer (2002) contend that the outcome of restorative conferences should be determined less by a complex psychological and emotional process such as forgiveness, and more by an immediate *performative action*. Doak (2011, p. 448) acknowledges that “complex emotional responses [like forgiveness] cannot be expected to precede such performative actions”, and “performative actions serve to generate the relevant feelings and emotions of forgiveness over the passage of time”. We take performative action to mean here the victim’s shorter-term behavioural choice about how to respond to the offender’s apology initially. If, as we suggest from our review, the *acceptance of an apology* is a performative action that occurs as an intermediary step prior to forgiveness and in direct response to receiving an apology, it may be desirable and more theoretically relevant for researchers and mediators to determine the outcome of restorative conferencing by whether or not the victim accepts the offender’s apology. Doak’s (2011) view would therefore be consistent with researchers who suggest the acceptance of an apology is an initial step in the corrective process that initiates the restorative path towards forgiveness (see, e.g., Harth *et al.* 2011, Kirchhoff *et al.* 2012, Wohl *et al.* 2015).

In sum, it may be unfair to expect victims to grant forgiveness in such brief encounters (Doak 2011), and doing so could paint an unfavourable picture of the effectiveness of restorative conferencing (see Hayes 2006). The acceptance of an apology, we suggest, may be a more appropriate way to infer the success of a restorative encounter because it appears to be a shorter-term behavioural action, and is commonly achieved in restorative conferencing (see, e.g., Shapland *et al.* 2006, Dhami 2012). Those who assess the outcomes of restorative conferences should therefore follow researchers like Dhami (2012, p. 55), who distinguishes between apology acceptance and forgiveness and suggests the acceptance of an apology is part of a “critical mechanism” in the resolution of victim-offender mediation cases.

### 5. Conclusions and future research directions

Our intention with this paper was to incite critical thinking about the way researchers and practitioners typically interpret peoples’ responses to apologies. We considered the traditional apology-followed-by-forgiveness sequence and suggested that some researchers and practitioners make a distinction between the acceptance of an apology and forgiveness. It may therefore benefit mediators and facilitators of processes such as restorative conferencing to consider the victim’s acceptance of the apology separately from their forgiveness of the offender. Moreover, the acceptance of an apology as a performative action may be a more suitable way to judge the outcome of a restorative encounter than a complex emotional process like forgiveness (see, e.g., Dzur and Wertheimer 2002).

Our review of the empirical literature on apology acceptance, however, suggested there is no established definition of the acceptance of an apology. Moreover, despite empirical findings that the acceptance of an apology and forgiveness may be separate responses, it is still not clear how apology acceptance differs from forgiveness. Research is therefore needed to reach a consensus on how to define the acceptance of an apology and to confirm there is a difference between apology acceptance and forgiveness in order to clarify the exact nature of the corrective process. While forgiveness is generally well-defined and can be operationalised in a number of ways, there is currently no equivalent interest in the process of accepting apologies. We believe that if apology acceptance is distinct from forgiveness, then it is deserving of the same empirical attention that forgiveness has received.

One way to advance understanding of apology acceptance and its place in the corrective process is to conduct further research, similar to that of Allan *et al.* (2014) and Kirchhoff and Čehajić-Clancy (2014), to determine how the appraisal of certain *antecedent* factors, like the relationship between the victim and offender and the quality of the apology, differentially affect peoples' reported acceptance of an apology and forgiveness. Moreover, exploring how individual differences such as peoples' need for closure or trait-level empathy influence their decisions to accept apologies or forgive may provide vital information about how these two responses differ. Researchers could also measure the *consequences* of accepting an apology versus forgiving, such as how participants respond to a scenario or person after accepting an apology, and how they respond after forgiving fully. For instance, if researchers can establish ways of measuring apology acceptance objectively, such as using behavioural or psychophysiological methodologies (see, e.g., Witvliet *et al.* 2008, Carlisle *et al.* 2012), it could be compared experimentally to forgiveness.

The way peoples' responses to apologies are conceptualised in the empirical literature has a direct effect on how responses to apologies are conceived in real-world settings because the empirical literature often informs practice. Mediators and practitioners have therefore been limited in their understanding of how people can respond to apologies based on much of the extant empirical literature that has focused almost purely on forgiveness as an outcome measure of apologies. We hope, however, the considerations within this paper are instructive and that they encourage researchers and practitioners alike to think critically about the corrective process and how the acceptance of apologies is conceived in both the empirical literature and real-world settings.

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