

# Apology Research: Past, Present, and Future

## — A Case of Japan and the U.S. —

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**Abstract:** This paper reviews the findings of existent empirical studies on apology in Japan and the U. S., and identifies problematic research designs used in those studies. As alternate approaches, four directions for future apology research are suggested: (a) using similarly perceived situations as stimuli to solicit apology, (b) testing whether cultural differences in apology styles create difficulties in intercultural communication, (c) finding underlying factors contributing to cultural differences in apology styles, and (d) studying apology styles in various contexts using diverse methodologies.

Considerable cultural differences in apology styles of U. S. Americans and Japanese have been widely acknowledged in the previous literature on U. S. American-Japanese communication: in general, Japanese are said to be more likely to apologize than are U. S. Americans; Japanese are also said to give more extended and elaborate apologies than are their American counterparts; U. S. Americans, in contrast, are said to give more excuses and justifications for their actions than Japanese while apologizing (Kato & Rozman, 1988; Kitagawa, 1990; Naotsuka, 1990). Yet, these observations, however insightful, are largely based on personal experiences of expatriates in both countries. Generalizability of these observations is yet to be proved through some empirical research. There are a limited number of empirical studies on cultural styles of apology, but they seem to rely on weak methodologies as discussed below, and therefore the results of those studies

are not highly convincing.

Given the current status of apology research, this paper purports to: (a) summarize findings from recent empirical research on apology, and (b) identify methodological problems in those studies, and (c) suggest directions for future apology research. The paper concludes that collaboration of researchers with different backgrounds and methodological expertise is inevitable in facilitating more active research on apology, and extends invitations for future collaborations to those interested in studying this communicative construct.

#### Findings from Recent Empirical Studies on Apology

As discussed above, apology research has been mainly done through personal observations and thus lacked in empirical evidence. In order to verify those observations, it is necessary to conduct empirical studies on apology. The studies reviewed below are: (a) single-culture studies on apology styles of individualistic cultures (Holmes, 1990; Schlenker & Darby, 1981) or collectivistic cultures (Furuya & Yuda, 1988; Ohbuchi et al., 1989), or (b) cross-cultural comparisons of apology styles in individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Japanese and U.S. Americans in Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; U.S. Americans and Spaniards in Mir, 1991). All of them are empirical studies, regardless of the methods used: naturalistic observation (Holmes, 1990), interview (Study 1 in Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990), or role-play (Study 2 in Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Furuya & Yuda, 1988; Mir, 1991; Ohbuchi et al., 1989). Specifically, the following three questions are answered while reviewing these studies: (a) what kinds of situations are expected to elicit apology?; (b) what message features embody in apology?; and (c) what are the anticipated reactions to various types of apology?

#### Situational Variations in Previous Research

Previous empirical studies used a variety of situations as stimuli to

elicit apologies. In this section, two of the most critical kinds of such variations in the situations are discussed: the kinds of offense committed and relationship between the offender and the victim.

Nature and severity of offense. What kind of offense has been committed seems to affect the ways in which the offender and the victim react to the situation. A broken vase and hurt feelings may both require apology, yet what is considered as an appropriate apology may not be the same in both instances. Thus, the type of offense used in the situations to elicit apology requires careful consideration in apology studies. In the following, two aspects of the type of offense are discussed: nature of offense and severity of offense.

Several previous empirical studies report that differences in the nature of offense affect the offender's response styles to the situation (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Holmes, 1990).<sup>1</sup> In the naturalistic observation of New Zealander apology, Holmes (1990) reports the effect of differences in the nature of offense on the particular apology styles employed. When the situation involved inconveniencing someone (e. g., not being able to provide the service requested), the offense was most likely (48.6%) to be remedied with an apology which includes a simple "sorry" statement and an explanation. When the offender invaded someone's personal space (e. g., taking someone's seat) or violated norms in conversation (e. g., interrupting someone), the offender was most likely to offer just a simple "sorry" (83.3% in space violation and 36.7% in talk violation). When the situation involved a time violation type of offense (e. g., being late for an appointment), the

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<sup>1</sup> One study (Schlenker & Darby, 1981) reports no situational differences found in the kinds of apologies offered. However, the two situations used in the study were very similar in terms of the nature of offense, bumping someone in a crowded shopping mall and bumping someone in a crowded campus area between classes. Thus, this finding by itself is not strong evidence that situational differences make no difference in apology styles. Rather, it suggests that more situational variety is needed in future research.

offense was most likely (50%) to be remedied with a message that included both a “sorry” statement and an account. When the offender caused some damage or loss to someone’s possessions (e. g., losing a book), an apology most often (40%) included a “sorry” statement and an offer of restitution. Finally, when a social etiquette rule was broken (e. g., burping), all the apologies reported took the form of simple statements such as “excuse me” or “pardon me.”

More important for cross-cultural research, situational differences seem to elicit different reactions from different cultures. Barnlund and Yoshioka (1990) report that situational differences affected the U. S. American and Japanese apology styles differently in two of the four types of offenses used in their study. In an interview part of their study, the researchers identified four types of situations that equally require apology in U. S. American and Japanese cultures: (a) mismanagement of time, (b) failure to complete an assignment, (c) incompetent completion of an assignment, and (d) a breach of social norms. The researchers used these situations in the subsequent survey part of the study and found that features of apology messages produced by U. S. Americans and Japanese differed in two situations: mismanagement of time and incompetent completion of an assignment.

Severity of offense directly affects the victim’s attitude toward the offender. Ohbuchi et al. (1989) found that Japanese participants in their study formed a more favorable impression of the apologizer (i. e., an offender who offered an apology) when the offense was mild than when it was severe. Second, severity of offense also affects the offender’s response to the situation (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Holmes, 1990). While both Japanese and U. S. Americans are more likely to use intensified expressions of apology (e. g., “I’m terribly sorry,” as compared to “Sorry about that”) when responding to situations involving a more severe offense (Mir, 1991;

Schlenker & Darby, 1981), the degree of intensification is greater among Japanese than among U. S. Americans (Sugimoto, 1995).

Beyond the intensity of apology expressions, various types of other apology strategies have been incorporated in the message depending upon the severity of offense in the situation. Overall, the more severe the offense is, the more types of strategies are included in apology messages (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Holmes, 1990; Mir, 1991; Schlenker & Darby, 1981). Moreover, while both U. S. Americans and Japanese adjust their apologies to the severity of offense, they seem to differ in their preferred forms for different levels of severity (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990). Mir (1991) found that U. S. Americans tended to include more strategies such as acknowledgment of responsibility in their apologies when the offense was severe than when it was not severe. In another study, the most commonly used strategy in Japanese apologies shifted from “apology” (e. g., admitting guilt or requesting forgiveness) to remediation as the emotional impact of unavoidable offense increased (Furuya & Yuda, 1988). When the offense was an avoidable one, the degree of violation (i. e., severity of offense) influenced the offender’s choice of accounts strategies: excuse or justification. When the offense was severe, justification was offered, whereas when the offense was not so severe, excuse by denying the intention (e. g., “What I did was bad, but I didn’t mean it”) was most likely to be offered by Japanese offenders (Furuya & Yuda, 1988).

Relationship between the offender and the victim. Not only the kind of offense committed, but also the relationship between the offender and the victim seems to influence people’s reactions to the offending situation. One common feature in the U. S. American and Japanese reactions to the variations in the relationship between the offender and the victim is that members of both cultures preferred more indirect modes of apology (e. g., nonverbal) when they offended their parents (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990).

Three other types of relationships (subordinate-superior, closest friends, and strangers) used in the same study (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990) yielded cultural differences in apology styles. In general, Japanese offenders employed a wider variety of apology strategies in adapting to the type of their relationship with the victims while U. S. American offenders tended to rely on the same narrow repertoire of apologies regardless of the nature of their relationship to the victims (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990).

In another study (Mir, 1991), U. S. Americans were found to react to two different types of relational factors when apologizing: age and familiarity. In terms of the victim's age, U. S. Americans used more intensified expressions of apology, more acknowledgment of responsibility, and more offers of repair to the old victims than young ones.<sup>2</sup> With regards to how familiar the victim is to the offender, more U. S. Americans offered explanations to unfamiliar victims than familiar ones; and more U. S. Americans offered to repair the damage to familiar victims than unfamiliar ones.

These reports seem to indicate that variations in situations used as stimuli to elicit apology have great influence on both the offender's and the victim's subsequent perceptions and actions.

#### Message Features that Embody in Apology

The types of strategies employed in apology were of greatest interest in most of previous empirical studies on apology. Analyzing the types of apologies Japanese offer, Furuya and Yuda (1988) found that: (a) controllability of offense affects the offender's decision between "apology-remediation" and "excuse-justification," (b) emotional impact of the

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<sup>2</sup> These results, however, should be interpreted with some caution. In this study (Mir, 1991), every participant was presented with all eight situations varying in the age of the victim. Thus, the manipulation of the age of the victim was quite obvious to the participants and that might have exaggerated the differentiation of messages based on the age. It is still possible that the trend exists, but the degree to which the trend affects the actual message might have been positively biased in this study.

damage affects the offender's decision between offering apology or remedy, and (c) the degree of violation affects the decision between excuse or justification.

In analyzing message features in New Zealander apology, Holmes (1990) found that 49.3% of strategies reported in this study were expressions of remorse, followed by explanations or accounts (23.2%), and request for forgiveness or offering repair (6% each). Other strategies such as acknowledgment of responsibility or promises of forbearance did not exceed 5% of use in New Zealander apology.

Schlenker and Darby (1981) found that when the offense was minor, U. S. American offenders used the perfunctory, "pardon me" more frequently as their responsibility for the offense increased. When the offense was severe and the offender was highly responsible for the offense, however, self-castigation and request for forgiveness were more frequently employed in U. S. American apology.<sup>3</sup>

Comparing U. S. American and Japanese styles of apology, Barnlund and Yoshioka (1990) found that "saying directly 'I'm sorry'" was the most popular form of apology in both Japan and the U. S. In U. S. American apology, explaining the situation was the second most common choice, while doing something for the other person was the second most popular strategy used in Japanese apology.

Sugimoto (1995) also found several cultural similarities and differences in message features employed in Japanese and U. S. American apologies. Given potentially offending situations, members of both cultures

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<sup>3</sup> Mir (1991) also studied U. S. American styles of apology and found that the frequency of use of each strategy in U. S. American apology was as follows: (a) apology, (b) offer of repair, (c) explanation, (d) acknowledgment of responsibility, (e) minimization of damage, (f) denial of apology, and (g) promise of forbearance. However, these findings are based on messages produced by only 29 U. S. Americans, and thus may not capture the full range of message features actually used in U. S. American apology.

reported that the offender would be more likely to apologize than not. Moreover, the relative ranking of each category of apology strategies in terms of its frequency of occurrence turned out to be the same between the cultures for the first four most commonly used categories of strategies: (a) statement of remorse (e. g., “I’m sorry”), (b) accounts, (c) description of damage, and (d) reparation. Beyond these basic similarities, Japanese generated messages with more segments (i. e., employing more strategies) than did U. S. Americans in their apology. Further, more U. S. Americans than Japanese included accounts in their apology, while Japanese were more likely than U. S. Americans to employ strategies such as statement of remorse, reparation, compensation, promise not to repeat the same offense, and request for forgiveness.

#### The Victim’s Reactions to Apology

While much of the research attention has focused on how apology messages are constructed and used, the effectiveness of these messages remains largely unknown. Among all the previous studies on apology, only one study (Ohbuchi et al., 1989) systematically investigated the victim’s reactions toward apologies offered by the offender.

The study involved Japanese participants in two different situations, one including physical (bumping into a stranger) and the other non-physical (miscalculating the victim’s test score in a mock experiment) damage. In both situations, the victim had a less unfavorable attitude toward the offender when apology was offered. In the situation involving non-physical damage, the victim perceived the offender who offered apology as more sincere, more responsible, more skilled, and more careful, and reported more pleasant feelings toward him or her. In the physical damage situation, apology elicited a more positive evaluation of the offender, but only when the damage was mild.

There are two additional findings worth noting in this study. First,



removal of damage (i. e., correcting the test score) alone had no significant effect on the victim's perception of the offender in the non-physical situation. Second, contrary to the prior expectation, the victim was more likely to resort to physical aggression toward the offender when the offender apologized in the physical-damage situation.

#### Methodological Problems in Previous Work on Apology

While the previous studies on apology have yielded some interesting findings, many of them seem to rely on weak methodologies. In the following, methodological problems in those studies are identified, especially in the areas of: (a) situations used as stimuli to elicit apologies, (b) analyzing message features in apology, and (c) methods of measuring the victim's perceptions of the situations.

#### Situational Variations Used to Elicit Apologies

As discussed above, situations used to elicit apologies greatly influence people's reactions, and thus need to be carefully selected for inclusion in future studies. Most important, severity of damage should be controlled and balanced because too insignificant damage may only elicit perfunctory apologies while too severe damage may lack realism to the participants. Further, a balance should be maintained between physical and non-physical types of damage in the situations presented as stimuli in apology research. In previous studies on apology, the vast majority of stimuli situations involved physical damage such as: (a) clumsiness (Furuya & Yuda, 1988; Holmes, 1990; Mir, 1991; Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Schlenker & Darby, 1981), (b) damage or loss of possession (Furuya & Yuda, 1988; Holmes, 1990; Mir, 1991), (c) physical aggression (Furuya & Yuda, 1988), and (d) traffic accidents (Furuya & Yuda, 1988; Mir, 1991). Two problems are identified with the use of situations involving physical damage. First, communication may play a less significant role in rectifying the situation when the damage is purely physical. For minor physical offenses, removal of the damage (e. g.,

no longer stepping on someone's foot) may be all that is needed to restore social balance in the situation. Second, the exclusive use of physical damage may limit the types of threat imposed on social balance. While most offenses involving physical damage may create rather materialistic damage, many of those involving non-physical damage can create psychological damage to the relationship. Thus, the exclusive use of one type of damage in stimuli situations may bias the findings about perceptions of the situations and resulting apology styles. Third, the exclusive use of physical damage limits the kinds of contextual information which may assist participants in evaluating the situation. For instance, in the case of stepping on someone's foot (physical damage), the offense is most likely to be taken as unintentional, whereas the respondents may attribute more intentionality to the offender in the case of speaking ill of someone behind his or her back (non-physical damage to the person's reputation). Then, naturally, respondents will perceive and react to these situations differently. Hence, a balance between physical damage and non-physical damage should be maintained in future studies on apology.

Some prior work on apology used non-physical damage in the stimuli situations, but the selection seems rather problematic. Many of these non-physical damage situations seem to lack realism to sample populations, either because the situations were arbitrarily created by researchers, or because specific circumstances involved in the situation are too idiosyncratic or unusual (e. g., stealing a bike or breaking an engagement; see Furuya & Yuda, 1988). Thus, it is important in apology studies to not only balance the types of offenses presented but also use situations that are well grounded in the participants' daily experience.

Not only the kind of offense committed, but also the relationship between the offender and the victim seems to influence people's reactions to the offending situation (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Mir, 1991). In previous

studies on apology, a wide variety of relationships existed between the offender and the victim: (a) strangers (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Furuya & Yuda, 1988; Mir, 1991; Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Schlenker & Darby, 1981), (b) friends (Furuya & Yuda, 1988), (c) romantic partners (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990; Furuya & Yuda, 1988), (d) colleagues (Furuya & Yuda, 1988), (e) superior-subordinate (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990), (f) teacher-student (Furuya & Yuda, 1988), and (g) parent-adult child (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990).

Although all the previous studies on apology reviewed here included situations involving strangers, future research should refrain from a heavy use of this type of situations for two reasons. First, apology interchanges between strangers take place least frequently both in Japan and the U. S. (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990). Thus, findings regarding apologies exchanged between strangers will have only limited generalizability. Second, the situations involving strangers will make only a limited contribution to our understanding of everyday interactions. Of more significance is an understanding of the way apology serves to restore social balance in ongoing relationships that the offender wishes to preserve.

#### Analyzing Message Features in Apology

Prior work on apology characterized apology messages using coding schemes of various sorts. Some of these schemes were not mutually exclusive but overlapping categories, which made it difficult to accurately interpret the results (Furuya & Yuda, 1988; Holmes, 1990). Others were arbitrarily generated by the researcher rather than empirically derived (Schlenker & Darby, 1981), and hence failed to adequately present a full range of messages that take place in actual apology interchanges. In Sugimoto (1995), however, open-ended questions, rather than structured responses, were used to solicit apologies, in order to insure inclusion of the full range of responses. Furthermore, the researcher developed a coding scheme that

was empirically derived and comprehensive in terms of capturing all observed features of the responses. Yet, the coding scheme needs to be tested for its validity and reliability in future studies on apology.

#### Measuring the Victim's Feelings about Potentially Offensive Situations

The aforementioned study (Ohbuchi et al., 1989) on the victim's reactions toward apologies measured the victim's reactions only once after both the situation and the apology were presented. As such, it is impossible to know to what extent the reaction was the result of the offense per se, or the result of the apology offered. In their daily interactions, people may become upset not so much because of the offense itself, but because of the way the offender did or did not apologize for it. In order to rectify this problem, Sugimoto (1995) measured the victim's reactions both before and after apology was offered, as well as when no apology was offered, and found that both Japanese and U. S. Americans felt less upset when apology was given and more upset when no apology was offered.

Furthermore, the victim's reactions should be further clarified, distinguishing reactions to the damage and the offender. In real life situations, these two types of feelings may not always coincide. Even when the victim may be highly upset about a major offense, he or she may be less upset with the offender knowing the offense was totally accidental. To the contrary, the victim may get more upset with the offender than about the damage when the victim regards the damage trivial but is not satisfied with the way the offender offered (or failed to offer) an apology. In order to distinguish these feelings, Sugimoto (1995) measured them separately and found that Japanese remained more upset about both the offense and the offender than did U. S. Americans after apology was given and that Japanese were more upset with the offender both before and after apology was offered than were U. S. Americans.

Directions for Future Apology Research

Given these findings and methodological limitations of the previous work on apology, several possible paths can be taken in further research on apology. In the following, four of such possible approaches in future research are discussed.

First, future studies should compare apology styles in response to offending situations which are similarly perceived in the two cultures. In previous studies, cultural differences in apology styles seem to be treated as manifestation of unique communicative practices of the cultures, and the researchers do not seem to consider the possibility that the differences can be attributed to fundamental differences in perceptions of various situations by members of those cultures. That is, in some situations, U. S. Americans and Japanese may perceive the situation similarly but apologize differently based upon culturally prescribed norms of apology within each culture. In other situations, U. S. Americans and Japanese may apologize differently primarily because they perceive the situation differently; if they perceive the situation similarly, they may react to it in much the same way.

Given that possibility, it is important to examine the cultural similarities and differences in perceptions of situations requiring apology. Unless this type of study is done, there always remains the possibility that different apology styles are actually due to different perceptions of situations but not in actual communicative styles of the two cultures. That is, previous studies might have simply presented situations which were more upsetting (and perhaps more requiring apology) in Japanese culture than in U. S. American culture, resulting in the seeming cultural differences in apology styles.

Sugimoto (1995) found that Japanese and U. S. Americans did not significantly differ in their perceptions of one of the situations used in her study, “assignment” in all eight dimensions: (a) realism, (b) the victim’s initial feelings about the damage, (c) the victim’s initial feelings about the

offender, (d) the victim's feelings if no apology was given, (e) the offender's decision to apologize, and (f) the victim's feelings about the damage as well as the offender after an apology was offered. If, in future studies on apology, significant cultural differences in apology styles are found in responses to this situation,<sup>4</sup> the differences can be more safely attributed to culturally different styles of apology in particular and of communication in general, rather than to fundamental differences in perceptions of the situation.

A second, and more fundamental question that needs to be addressed in future apology research is whether cultural differences in apology styles really create difficulties in intercultural communication. Japanese may dislike certain types of apologies given by their fellow nationals. But coming from U. S. Americans, the same apology style may not surprise or upset the same Japanese individual. In the culture where outsiders are often excused for their social faux pas just by the virtue of being "foreign," Japanese may attribute the "peculiar" apology to the offender's not being "one of them" and dismiss it like they would never do for their Japanese counterparts. Likewise, U. S. Americans may not even notice idiosyncrasies of apology styles of their Japanese counterparts when cultural differences in other aspects of their interactions are paramount. All the differences reported in the previous studies strongly suggest the possibility that cultural differences in apology styles can have grievous consequences, but the point has yet to be empirically proven. To that end, some reaction studies should be conducted in the future, in which prototypical "Japanese" and "U. S. American" apology styles are given to members of the two cultures as apologies given by members of their own culture or the other culture. In

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<sup>4</sup> As Jackson and Jacobs (1983) argue, a single instantiation of an independent variable is not desirable in communication research. Thus, the situation, "assignment" should be used along with several other situations that are tested to be perceived similarly in both cultures.

order to effectively assess reactions to such situations, analysis of naturalistic interactions (such as discourse analytic studies of naturally occurring conversations), rather than paper-and-pencil questionnaire methods, seems preferable.

Third, future apology studies need to go beyond the report of cultural differences and similarities and try to account for the differences and similarities. For that purpose, the victim's perceptions of the offending situations need to be measured in multiple dimensions rather than just the degree of damage or hurt feelings. For instance, the victim's perceptions of factors such as intentionality of the offender, preventability of the offense, and reparability of damage can be assessed in future studies, so as to enable researchers to draw conclusions regarding correlation between these factors as well as correlation between those factors and the offender's apology styles or the victim's reactions to the apology.

Another path that can be taken to a more comprehensive account of cultural differences in apology styles is to study socialization processes in the two cultures in which young members in each culture learn culturally appropriate ways of apologizing. Participant observation or ethnographic studies at home or in the kindergarten or preschool may provide invaluable insight into these "apology socialization processes."

Fourth, to increase generalizability of findings, future researchers of apology should study this communicative construct in various contexts and using different samples. For instance, interactions in business contexts may yield different results than those in family contexts. Age groups different from typically used accessible samples of college students may also yield different findings. Sugimoto (1995) suggests that there may be generational differences in the Japanese preference of including accounts in apology. Studies involving older generations may empirically prove this observation based on the review of literature.

### Conclusion

In this paper, the findings of existent empirical research on apology were reviewed regarding three aspects of apology: (a) the effect of situational variations on the offender's and victim's subsequent actions and perceptions, (b) message features embodied in apology, and (c) the effect of apology on the victim's feelings.

Following the summary of research findings, problematic research designs in those studies were identified in three areas: (a) situations used as stimuli to elicit apologies, (b) methods of analyzing apology messages, and (c) methods of assessing the effect of apologies on the victim's feelings.

As alternate approaches in future apology research, four directions were suggested: (a) using similarly perceived situations as stimuli to solicit apologies, (b) testing whether cultural differences in apology styles create difficulties in intercultural communication, (c) finding underlying factors contributing to cultural differences in apology styles, and (d) studying apology styles in various contexts using diverse methodologies.

From these suggestions, it is clear that collaboration of researchers with different training and methodological expertise is inevitable for future apology research. The author encourages those interested in further studying this communicative construct to undertake such collaborative projects.



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