2011 Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship Proposal
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1. Project title and descriptive summary

I'm so sorry it's raining! The positive effects of superfluous apologies

An apology is a useful device for creating a favorable impression (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982). Apologies increase liking and can be particularly effective in repairing relationships. Recent work has demonstrated that apologizing following a transgression can restore trust (e.g., Haselhuhn, Schweitzer, & Wood, 2009; Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004; Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006; Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow). All of this work, however, has presumed that individuals or groups apologize for things that either *are* or *might be* their fault.

For this project, we focus on the effects of **superfluous apologies**, or apologizing for regrettable circumstances that are *not* your fault. Tannen (2001) posits that women are more likely to make superfluous apologies than men, and that making a superfluous apology decreases the perceived power and status of the apologizer. In contrast, we hypothesize that superfluous apologies increase perceptions of warmth-based trust and likeability, and that these positive effects overwhelm the negative effect of superfluous apologies on perceived power and status.

Work Completed.

We have conducted one study that demonstrates the feasibility of this program of research and underscores its import. In Study 1, we tested whether or not issuing a superfluous apology increases benevolence-based trust and likeability, and decreases perceptions of power and status.

We randomly assigned participants to one of two between-subject conditions (Apology v. No apology). Following three rounds of a repeated trust game and an exogenously-imposed transgression, participants in the Apology condition received a superfluous apology from their counterpart (simulated): "I'm really sorry the computer changed my choice last round." In the No apology condition, participants received a blank message from their counterpart: "Your counterpart did not enter any text." Our main dependent variable was behavior in the fourth round of the repeated trust game and perceptions of the counterpart (ability- and benevolence-based trust, likeability, social closeness, and power).

Consistent with our hypothesis, 77% of the participants in the Apology condition trusted the counterpart in the last round of the game while only 64% of the participants in the No apology condition trusted the counterpart in the last round of the trust game ($p < .0001$). Also, participants in the Apology condition rated their counterpart as significantly higher on measures of benevolence-based trust, likeability, and social closeness than did participants in the No apology condition. We did not find significant differences for perceived power.

Planned Program of Studies.

Topic	Description	Status
Study 1: Main Effect	Apology v. No-apology in a repeated trust game (with a stochastic, exogenous shock)	Completed.
Study 2: Taxonomy of a superfluous apology	Manipulate characteristics of the apology itself.	Plan to run in Wharton Behavioral Lab by May 2011.
Study 3: Field Study	RA apologizes for the rain ("I'm so sorry it's raining") v. does not apologize to passersby in 30th Street Station and asks to borrow a cell phone.	To be completed by April 2011.
Study 4:Gender	Large survey of adult population to observe gender effects. Do women make more superfluous apologies than men? Are superfluous apologies more effective when made by men?	To be completed by October 2011.

References

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