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Research article

Refusing to apologize can have psychological benefits (and we issue no mea culpa for this research finding)

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Abstract

Despite an understanding of the perception and consequences of apologies for their recipients, little is known about the consequences of interpersonal apologies, or their denial, for the offending actor. In two empirical studies, we examined the unexplored psychological consequences that follow from a harm-doer's explicit refusal to apologize. Results showed that the act of refusing to apologize resulted in greater self-esteem than not refusing to apologize. Moreover, apology refusal also resulted in increased feelings of power/control and value integrity, both of which mediated the effect of refusal on self-esteem. These findings point to potential barriers to victim–offender reconciliation after an interpersonal harm, highlighting the need to better understand the psychology of harm-doers and their defensive behavior for self-focused motives. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

> "An apology? Bah! Disgusting! Cowardly! Beneath the dignity of any gentleman, however wrong he might be." – *Baroness Emmuska* Orczy (1906), *I Will Repay*

People say apologies are cheap. They may be easy to provide, but they can also be useful. Apologies lead their recipients and other observers to reduce their perceptions of blameworthiness (Gonzales, Haugen, & Manning, 1994; Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981), resulting in a more positive view of the offender (Bobocel & Zdaniuk, 2005; Shaver, 1985) and decreased punishment severity (Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Felson & Ribner, 1981; Rumsey, 1976). They can appease the protests of injustice victims by mitigating negative emotions (Baron, 1990; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989) and can even create constraints for their recipients, guiding the victims of an offense toward possibly unearned forgiveness (Bennett & Dewberry, 1994; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). If apologies are relatively easy and effective in diffusing offender-directed outrage, why then might offenders choose to withhold them?

Apologies are, by definition, an acknowledgment of harm and admission of responsibility. Therefore, in some instances, harm-doers may avoid apologies to circumvent the implied admission of guilt (Robbennolt, 2003) and elude additional penance or restitution. Harm-doers may also have an implicit knowledge of the acceptability of their apologetic actions, withholding an apology for fear that it will be perceived as insincere and further compound the initial transgression (Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 2004). However, such strategic omissions still do not explain reluctance to apologize when it is clear that an apology will elicit forgiveness or when it has already been determined that a harm-doer is at fault and all that is required to reduce punishment severity is a simple apology (Robbennolt, 2003). Indeed, in many cases, apology is a clearly rational course of action for an offender (Morse, 2005). If apologies are rational, it suggests that psychological motives may partly underlie their denial. What is the psychological benefit of refusing to apologize? Little empirical research has explored the consequences of interpersonal apologies for the harm-doer (cf., Exline, Deshea, & Holeman, 2007), and there has been no research to date explicitly investigating harm-doers' explicit "refusal" to apologize as it contrasts with inaction, the psychological consequences of that refusal for harm-doers, or what motivates their refusal decision.

Given the dearth of evidence about refusals to apologize, we attempt to glean insight into their effects by first examining relevant research on the symbolic meaning of apologies. Surprisingly, examination of this work suggests that there may actually be potential psychological "benefits" for harm-doers who explicitly refuse to apologize to their victims, consequences that may partly underlie an offender's desire to withhold an apology. Specifically, refusing to apologize may enhance a harm-doer's feelings of power/control and value integrity, reactions that are tied to feelings of self-worth.

The Meaning of an Apology for Victims

Research often conceptualizes apologies as an equity-restoring response (Karp, 1998; Wood & Mitchell, 1981). Through their

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transgression, offenders symbolically (and actually) remove power from their victims (Heider, 1958; Miller, 2001; Murphy & Hampton, 1988). Intentional harms disturb a victim's sense of autonomy and disrupt the balance of equitable status and power between the two parties (Vidmar & Miller, 1980). The offer of an apology may speak to this inequity, restoring a sense of justice in victims by empowering them with decision-making control to either accept or reject that apology and/or to withhold forgiveness (Petrucci, 2002). Consistent with this view, recent research has shown that heightened concerns over power and control, implicated either through individual differences or situational salience, lead victims of harm to seek apologies as part of the desired injustice response (Okimoto, Wenzel, & Feather, 2009, 2012). However, the benefits of receiving an apology for a victim's feelings of power/control go even further than decision control. By accepting the apology and forgiving the harm-doer, victims are given the opportunity to take the moral high-ground by providing offenders with an undeserved gift (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003), placing the victim in a position of power and superiority (i.e., the power to forgive; Schimmel, 2002; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010). Even rejecting a harm-doer's apology can empower victims, affording them a position of control over the offender (Abel, 1998). In sum, receipt of an apology is empowering for the victims of harm.

Notably, there is an alternative view about the meaning of an apology. Rather than restoring justice for the victim through reallocation of power/control, apologies may be effective in restoring a sense of justice for victims by communicating agreement that the offense was wrong (Abel, 1998; Tavuchis, 1991). Through their violation, harm-doers undermine a shared understanding that exists between harm-doer and victim, the (often unspoken) agreement about what constitutes acceptable behavior (Rousseau, 1989). Transgressions exhibit the harm-doer's disdain for or lack of agreement with the norms/values defining that behavior as unacceptable, undermining the validity of those supposedly shared values (De Castella, Platow, Wenzel, Okimoto, & Feather, 2011; Durkheim, 1964; Tyler & Boeckmann, 1997; Vidmar, 2000). Such value threats elicit in the victim a desire to restore a perceived consensus surrounding those values, to see a renewed agreement about the importance of shared values in that relationship (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2008; Wenzel, Okimoto, Feather, & Platow, 2008, 2010). However, by admitting the wrongfulness of his or her actions through an apology, the offender is often able to revalidate the shared consensus between harm-doer and harm-victim (Abel, 1998; Tavuchis, 1991). Such consensus is often critical to a victim's sense of justice, particularly when that victim shares a relationship or common group membership with the harm-doer (Okimoto, Wenzel, & Platow, 2010). For example, Wenzel and colleagues (2010) showed that victims of workplace theft desired an apology more when the thief was an ingroup versus outgroup member and that this effect was mediated by a desire for shared value consensus with the harm-doer.

Through these two processes, by empowering the victim and/or revalidating acceptable standards of behavior, apologies may speak to a victim's feelings of injustice (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2008). Importantly, these same processes also imply symbolic meaning for the conveyer of the apology, meanings that may motivate acts of refusal rather than contrition.

The Meaning of an Apology (and its Refusal) for Harm-doers

Both empowerment and acknowledgment functions of an apology suggest corresponding consequences for the harm-doer. If an apology confers control onto the victim (Abel, 1998; Petrucci, 2002), it is reasonable to expect that apology to also diminish the power held by the harm-doer. Such conferral may restore equity between harm-doer and harm-victim, but disempowerment is nonetheless threatening to the harm-doer. Interestingly, whereas the provision of an apology may relinquish power/control, a harm-doer's decision to "refuse" to apologize may foster "greater" feelings of power/control. By refusing to apologize, the harm-doer retains dominance over the victim (Kittle, 1999; Regehr & Gutheil, 2002). Consistent with this idea, Hodgins and Liebeskind (2003) found that individuals with low self-determination (i.e., being concerned about their autonomy and control) were more likely to respond to severe reproach with defensive behavior. In line with this reasoning, we predict that apology refusals will foster greater feelings of power and control in harm-doers compared with inaction.

Following the alternative view of apologies as a reaffirmation of values and acceptable conduct, an apology functions as a form of self-censure on the part of the harm-doer (Scher & Darley, 1997). However, such an apology also implies a lack of consistency between the harm-doer's past behavior and their apologetic attitudes; acknowledging the wrong requires admission of incongruence between a harm-doers beliefs/values implied by the apology and those implied by the act of harm. Such self-incongruence may upset feelings of "value integrity"—keeping one's values intact and uncorrupted—a core motive explicated in a number of psychological theories (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Festinger, 1957; Lecky, 1945; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988; Swann, 1983). Echoing this idea, Goffman (1971) noted that apologies are "a gesture through which the individual splits himself in two parts, the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the deceit and affirms a belief in the offended rule" (pp. 113). He suggested that although this "splitting of the self" can give rise to self-related dissonance, a sincere apology may also help to reconcile this inconsistency by revealing their ideal or essential moral character. Stated differently, an apology provides the harm-doer with a social account (Gonzales et al., 1994; Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981), reducing the self-relevant moral implications of the transgression, reducing self-guilt, and revalidating commitment to the values that define the true self (Bobocel & Zdaniuk, 2005; Shaver, 1985).

Interestingly, however, even if apologies are functional for protecting one's integrity and diminishing feelings of self-blame, these benefits may not be exclusive to an apology. Paradoxically, a "refusal" to apologize may also offer the same psychological value to a harm-doer. Refusing to admit to a wrong helps to maintain consistency between the harm-doer's actions and his or her idealized self-concept. Indeed, people are often motivated toward self-consistency even when the resulting attribution is negative (Lecky, 1945). Thus, even though defending a negative behavior may insinuate a less benevolent character, the act of refusing to apologize may still help facilitate perceptions of self-consistency, reducing self-oriented dissonance and enhancing feelings of value integrity.

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Refusals to Apologize and a Harm-doer's Feelings of Self-worth

As this discussion suggests, a harm-doer's refusal to apologize may have implications for that individual's feelings of power/control and value integrity. Although these possible consequences may serve as a source of motivation for a harm-doer's refusal to apologize, they are also indicative of more fundamental concerns over self-worth. Both feelings of power/control and value integrity are central to one's self-concept.

First, as we have argued, apology refusals may empower a harm-doer by disallowing the resignation of control over to the harm-victim. Such feelings of power/control may have broader consequences for feelings of self-worth or self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967). As suggested by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), autonomous motivation is a critical antecedent of subjective well-being (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Sheldon & Kasser, 1995). Similarly, the research by Heppner et al. (2008) showed that daily perceptions of autonomy were positively related to daily fluctuations in self-esteem. Thus, the power/control claimed through an explicit refusal to apologize may also be tied to heightened feelings of self-esteem.

Second, we have also argued that apology refusals may defend the harm-doer's integrity by denying the wrongfulness of the harm itself and thus the inconsistency between one's values and actions. Again, this value integrity implication of apology refusal is tied to more fundamental concerns over feelings of self-worth (e.g., Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). By definition, having integrity implies principled and moral action, being true to one's values and being a good person (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). Research has shown that individuals seek to maintain their existing view of the self, particularly in the face of negative threats, to preserve a positive sense of identity (Steele, 1988). Similarly, the study by Heppner et al. (2008) showed that perceptions of authenticity (being true to one's self) were a positive predictor of self-esteem. Along these lines, to the extent that the refusal to apologize aids the harm-doer in maintaining feelings of value integrity, it should also enhance feelings of self-esteem. Thus, through these two processes (of maintaining status/power and value integrity), we suggest that the act of refusing to apologize may serve to enhance a harm-doer's positive self-view.

Apologies versus Refusals versus Inaction

Interestingly, at face value this reasoning appears to contradict research suggesting a potential link between the apologetic sentiments and self-esteem (although to our knowledge, a direct tie has yet to be identified). Specifically, feelings of guilt often elicit the desire to apologize (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995), and conferral of that apology can reduce guilt (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Bauer, 2002). Given that feelings of guilt accompany reduced self-esteem (see Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994), these findings suggest that the provision of an apology (and the implied reduction in guilt) may also aid the harm-doer in fostering feelings of self-worth. Importantly, however, even if apology does elicit greater feelings of self-esteem, it does not negate the possibility that "both apology and refusal" have a positive effect on self-worth relative to inaction. So, despite being apparent conceptual antonyms, both apologetic "and" nonapologetic responses may help the harm-doer maintain a positive sense of self.

Given this possibility, when examining the consequences that follow from a refusal to apologize (the focus of the current investigation), it is important to consider what the refusal is being compared with. If apologies and refusals do have similar consequences, their exclusive comparison (which assumes that refusals are the opposite of apologies) may obscure meaningful effects. Moreover, if any differences between refusals and apologies do emerge, the exclusive comparison also leaves us unable to attribute those consequences to the act of refusal versus the absence of an apology. Thus, it is critical to consider "inaction" as the most relevant comparison condition. It is worth noting that much of the apology literature contains similar conceptual confounds; in many cases, it is unclear whether the consequences associated with apologies are in comparison with an explicit apology refusal, inaction, or a failure to confer an apology that the harm-doer wishes to offer (i.e., apologetic regret). With this consideration in mind, although we focus on the effect of apology refusals as they relate to inaction, we examine their consequences as they compare with both inaction and apology, dual comparisons that allow clearer insight into the psychology of refusing to apologize.

The Current Investigation

Taken together, the literature surrounding the symbolic meaning of apologies suggests that, although there are psychological benefits of apologies for the victims of harm and perhaps even benefits for the apologizing harm-doer, there may "also" be potential benefits for that harm-doer when refusing to apologize. Specifically, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 1: The act of refusing to apologize will result in feelings of greater power/control than no act of refusal.

Hypothesis 2: The act of refusing to apologize will result in feelings of greater value integrity than no act of refusal.

In addition, given the centrality of these concerns for broader feelings of self-worth, we also predict the following:

Hypothesis 3: The act of refusing to apologize will result in greater personal self-esteem than no act of refusal, mediated by feelings of power/control and value integrity.

Perhaps underlying the lack of empirical research surrounding the harm-doer perspective in apologies (and deviance more broadly), these predictions are particularly difficult to assess using standard social-psychological paradigms. The trade-off between realism and experimental control is compounded by the limits that the "harm" context places on experimentation. On the one hand, examining the correlates of respondents' past (un)apologetic actions does not allow clear interpretation of the effects as following from the (non)apology versus spuriously correlated variables such as offense severity, moral justification, or a lack of apology need/appropriateness (see Exline et al., 2007). On the other hand, not only is it ethically questionable to trick participants into thinking they have committed some harm against another person, but it is also impossible to then randomly assign them to explicitly deny closure to their victims.

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In the current investigation, we offer our best attempt at experimentally probing these causal research questions by offering replication across two novel paradigms that fall between the realistic (yet only suggestive) correlational studies asking participants to report past behavior and the controlled (yet somewhat artificial) scenario studies telling participants to imagine they had refused to apologize. Study 1 examines reactions to past personal experiences of harm-doing, comparing cases of apology, refusal, and inaction, while also capturing a number of potentially confounding variables. Study 2 then employs a novel experimental paradigm that asks participants to recall personal experiences of harm-doing and then randomly assigns them to formulate (non)apologetic responses. By showing convergence across these two methods, the current studies aim to offer evidence that the act of refusing to apologize may engender positive self-relevant consequences.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, participants were asked to recall and reflect on a personal experience where they had refused to apologize (or conferred an apology, or taken no (un)apologetic actions), while also keeping note of possible confounding variables. This method allows us to identify the consequences of an apology refusal, while also testing for a variety of confounds prevalent in examinations of retrospectively recalling past decisions to refuse an apology.

Method

Participants included 228 adult respondents (US residents; 68% female) between 18 and 77 years of age ($M = 37.8$, $Mdn = 35.0$, $SD = 13.4$), recruited online in exchange for a lottery reward. Study 1 consisted of a four-cell between-subjects design embedded within a retrospective recall paradigm. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four recall conditions: baseline, apology, refusal, or inaction. Participants in the baseline condition were prompted to "Think about a time when you did something that upset someone, something you did or said that caused someone else to be upset." By comparison, participants in the apology condition were prompted to "Think about a time when you did something that upset someone that you later *apologized* for – something you did or said that caused someone else to be upset and you chose to apologize to them." Participants in the refusal condition were prompted to "Think about a time when you did something that upset someone, but you *refused* to apologize – something you did or said that caused someone else to be upset, but you chose NOT to apologize to them." Finally, participants in the inaction condition were prompted to "Think about a time when you did something that upset someone – something you did or said that caused someone else to be upset, but you *did NOT take any action*. You did not apologize, but you also did not refuse to apologize – you simply did nothing". To better engage participants in these prompts, all participants were also asked three open-ended questions about the event: "What exactly did you do?", "Who was the person that you upset?", and "How did they react?" Reported incidents varied widely, from minor verbal conflicts and accidents to severe cases of marital infidelity and criminal behavior.

Despite obvious selective recall confounds these prompts might introduce (see Exline et al., 2007), we opted to ask participants to recollect refusal events (or apologies, inaction, or baseline) instead of employing pure correlational procedures asking them to recall a harmful event and then code their (non) apologetic behaviors. Given the possible confounds introduced by this recall procedure, the results of Study 1 should be interpreted with caution. However, to help circumvent this issue, we included a series of checks and controls measuring critical variables on which our manipulations might be confounded.

Manipulation Checks and Controls

To assess the effectiveness of the manipulations, we asked participants about their apologetic actions ("How apologetic were you in your interactions with him/her?") as well as their apologetic feelings ("How apologetic did you feel?"; 1 = not at all apologetic, 7 = very apologetic). We also assessed perceptions of offense seriousness. It is possible that apology refusals relate to self-esteem because both reflect the harm-doer's moral justification of the offense, rationalization that increases both self-esteem and the likelihood that he or she will refuse to apologize (i.e., a spurious correlation). Indeed, Baumeister, Stillwell, and Wotman's (1990) correlational analyses of harm-doers' autobiographical narratives provide evidence that their accounts of an offense often contain self-serving rationalizations, perceiving the offense as less severe and more justified than their victims and viewing those victims as excessively angry (see also Darby & Schlenker, 1989). Such defensive reactions are pervasive; individuals commonly reconstrue events and actions to meet the egoistic impressions of the self (Greenwald, 1980). From this perspective, both the apology refusal and feelings of self-esteem are a "consequence" of rationalization, cognitive interpretations of the negative event as less severe, serving to maintain positive self-evaluations. Notably, this is not inconsistent with the current perspective, as the decision to refuse an apology may indeed be partly determined by preceding justifications. However, we suggest that moral justification does not entirely explain the psychological consequences of the act of refusing to apologize, in particular the feelings of self-worth associated with elevated perceptions of power/control and value integrity. Therefore, in Study 1, we included a subjective assessment of severity (indicative of some rationalization process) and examined it as a competing mediator; participants were asked, "How serious were your actions?" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). To identify other potential differences between conditions that might confound the manipulations, we also asked: "Did this person want you to apologize?", "Did this person ask you to apologize?", "Did you feel coerced, like you had to apologize?", and "How close are you with the person you upset?"

Dependent Measures

Participants reported how they felt about themselves following this situation. Items were rated on 7-point scales (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), reversed valence items [r/c] were recoded so that higher numbers indicated positive feelings, and composite scales were created by averaging items. Participants reported feelings of *power/control* by rating the extent to which they felt: strong,

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powerful, weak[r/c], and demeaned[r/c]. Participants reported feelings of *value integrity* by rating the extent to which they felt: courageous, sincere, and passive[r/c]. Finally, participants reported feelings of *self-esteem* by rating the extent to which they felt: good, satisfied, proud, and worthy. Reliability statistics and correlations between measures are presented in Table 1.

Results

Preliminary analysis indicated that, as intended, participants in the apology condition reported feeling and acting the most apologetic, whereas participants in the refusal condition reported feeling and acting the least apologetic (see Table 2). Moreover, preliminary analyses indicated that these conditions were not confounded with demands for an apology, felt coercion, interpersonal closeness with the victim, or perceived offense severity. The manipulations did not have significant effects on any of these additional measures, nor did their inclusion in the analysis reduce or moderate the effects of the manipulations. Thus, these additional measures are not discussed further, with the exception of offense severity; given that severity could potentially undermine the interpretation of the other dependent measures, we included it as a control in the analyses despite the lack of a significant effect of the manipulations.

Results were obtained using regression techniques; manipulated variables were dummy coded to indicate the effect of apology and (separately) refusal, relative to the inaction condition; the baseline condition was included for comparison, but this condition was ignored for the regression analysis. See Table 2 for cell means and intercell comparisons and Table 3 for the full results of the regression analyses. Results indicated that participants in the refusal condition reported greater feelings of power/control, greater feelings of value integrity, and greater self-esteem than participants in the inaction condition. Participants in the refusal condition also reported greater power/control and self-esteem than those in the apology condition, although the refusal and apology conditions did not differ in value integrity; both refusal and apology elicited greater feelings of value integrity compared with inaction.

Mediational/indirect paths were then explored using bootstrapping techniques that allow for the examination of multiple mediators and specific indirect effects with small samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; see also Shrout & Bolger, 2002). When considering status/power and value integrity as mediators, the act of apology had a significant positive indirect effect on self-esteem through value integrity, $B = .20$, $SE = .09$ (95% CI = .05–.39). Refusal also had a significant positive indirect effect on self-esteem, through *both* power/control, $B = .46$, $SE = .18$ (95% CI = .08–.59), and value integrity, $B = .17$, $SE = .13$ (95% CI = .01–.39), and the direct effect of refusal on self-esteem was reduced to nonsignificance when controlling for these mediators.

Discussion

The results from Study 1 generally supported our predictions. All participants reflected on a past event where they harmed another person. However, those harm-doers who recalled events where they had refused to apologize reported feeling more powerful (Hypothesis 1), greater value integrity (Hypothesis 2), and more positive self-esteem (Hypothesis 3), compared with those harm-doers who recalled an event where they took no (un)

Table 1. Zero-order correlations between dependent measure scales

Study 1	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self-esteem ($\alpha = .85$)	—				
2. Power/control ($\alpha = .73$)	.65***	—			
3. Value integrity ($\alpha = .70$)	.55***	.49***	—		
4. Apologetic feelings	−.25***	−.41***	−.19**	—	
5. Apologetic actions	−.18**	−.38***	−.13*	.85***	—
6. Offense severity	−.06	−.07	.14*	.21***	.19**
Study 2	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Self-esteem ($\alpha = .93$)	—				
2. Power/control ($\alpha = .89$)	.60***	—			
3. Value integrity ($\alpha = .77$)	.45***	.46***	—		
4. Apologetic feelings	−.21**	−.26***	−.33***	—	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2. Study 1. Means and standard deviations for dependent measure scales

Measured Variable	Baseline ($n = 54$)	Apologized ($n = 59$)	Inaction ($n = 56$)	Refused ($n = 59$)
Apologetic actions	4.96 (2.58)$_b$	6.41 (1.80)$_a$	4.54 (2.26)$_b$	3.46 (2.39)$_c$
Apologetic feelings	4.67 (2.84)$_b$	6.24 (1.92)$_a$	4.38 (2.41)$_b$	2.95 (2.20)$_c$
Offense severity	3.26 (1.59)$_a$	3.51 (1.80)$_a$	3.39 (1.58)$_a$	3.75 (2.01)$_a$
Power/control	4.08 (1.45)$_a$	3.92 (1.29)$_a$	4.17 (1.31)$_a$	4.79 (1.29)$_b$
Value integrity	4.30 (1.17)$_{ab}$	4.51 (0.95)$_a$	3.99 (1.22)$_b$	4.47 (1.27)$_a$
Self-esteem	3.41 (1.62)$_a$	3.43 (1.38)$_a$	3.35 (1.40)$_a$	3.96 (1.34)$_b$

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Means within rows that do not share subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$ as determined by Fisher's least significant difference comparisons.

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Table 3. Study 1. Hierarchical regression results for dependent measures

Measured Variable	Predictor	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3	
		β	*t*-value	β	*t*-value	β	*t*-value
Offense severity	Apologized	.02	0.27				
	Refused to apologize	.09	1.05				
Power/control	Apologized	−.09	−1.04	−.09	−1.01		
	Refused to apologize	.22	2.56**	.23	2.64**		
	Offense severity	—	—	−.08	−1.07		
Value integrity	Apologized	.21	2.45*	.21	2.41*		
	Refused to apologize	.20	2.24*	.18	2.07*		
	Offense severity	—	—	.17	2.32*		
Self-esteem	Apologized	.03	0.30	.03	0.34	−.00	−0.02
	Refused to apologize	.21	2.38*	.22	2.48*	.06	0.85
	Offense severity	—	—	−.10	−1.32	−.12	−2.04*
	Power/control	—	—	—	—	.44	6.62***
	Value integrity	—	—	—	—	.33	4.99***

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

apologetic action. These findings offer the first evidence that the refusal to apologize can result in positive self-relevant consequences for harm-doers.

We can also compare these findings with the consequences of apology conferral. Participants recalling an act of harm where they apologized did not experience greater feelings of power/control compared with inaction (and less than refusal). However, like refusals, apologies *did* aid in enhancing feelings of value integrity and (indirectly, through value integrity) feelings of self-esteem. These findings are notable because they suggest that apologies and refusals are *not* conceptual antonyms but rather reflect different processes. Thus, the assumption that the effects of an apology are opposite to those of a refusal to apologize is misled.

It is also notable that the consequences of apologies and refusals were not due to differences in perceived harm severity; severity was a significant predictor of feelings of self-worth, but it did not explain the effects of the manipulations. Thus, the alternative explanation that participants' refusal is tied to rationalization of the harm is not supported. However, despite this evidence and the nonrelevance of other possible confounding variables, Study 1 is limited in that there may still be unanticipated spurious variables that correlate with (and thus confound) the types of events recalled. Therefore, it is critical to offer more direct causal evidence that is unimpeded by selective recall.

STUDY 2

In Study 2, we employed an experimental paradigm where participants recalled a past case of harm-doing and then were instructed to behave in accordance with the experimental manipulation by formulating a written apology refusal (or apology, or control) regardless of their own personal views. This approach mirrors interventions that have been used in past research to understand the consequences of cognitive perspective taking (e.g., Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978), confession (e.g., Pennebaker, Hughes, & O'Heeron, 1987), and forgiveness (e.g., Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010, 2012), procedures that ask participants to reflect on a particular course of action that may or may not diverge from their natural behavioral inclinations. This method allows us to identify the causal consequences of an apology refusal, while also avoiding a variety of confounds prevalent in examinations of retrospectively recalling past decisions to refuse an apology.

Method

Participants included 219 adult respondents (US residents; 73% female) between 18 and 71 years of age ($M = 36.4$, $Mdn = 34.0$, $SD = 12.8$), recruited online in exchange for a lottery reward. Study 2 included a 3-condition experimental manipulation assigning participants to an act of apology, an act of refusal, or control. At the start of the study, respondents were asked to reflect on a personal experience where they did something that upset someone (identical to the Study 1 baseline condition). Following the retrospective recall prompt, participants in the "apology condition" were instructed to:

> Imagine that this had just happened, and that the other person had asked you for an apology. Write an e-mail to this person, telling him/her that you *apologize* for your actions. It doesn't matter if this is how you feel or what you did; please just imagine that you are emailing to express your *apology*. Please outline exactly what you would say. Tell him/her you apologize, and tell him/her why.

In the "refusal condition," participants were presented with a similar prompt asking for an explicit apology refusal (e.g., "telling him/her that you *refuse to apologize* for your actions."). Participants in the control condition did not receive an additional prompt. Although hypothetical in nature, this method of allowing participants to formulate their own (non)apologetic responses in connection with a retrospective event offers the realism of an actual instance of harm, while still facilitating much more experimental control than the manipulations in Study 1 (which could be confounded with selective recall).

Manipulation Checks and Dependent Measures

To assess the effectiveness of the manipulations, we asked participants about their apologetic feelings ("How apologetic do you feel right now?";1 = not at all, 7 = very much). For our primary dependent measures, participants in Study 2 were asked

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to rate their agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) with a number of explicit statements; these measures diverged from those assessed in Study 1 to avoid possible construct ambiguity in participant reports of their general feelings. Reversed valence items [r/c] were recoded so that higher numbers indicated more positive feelings, and composite scales were created by averaging items. The measure assessing feelings of *power/control* included the statements: “I feel in charge”, “I feel powerful”, “I feel in control”, and “I don’t let other people intimidate me”. The measure assessing feelings of *value integrity* included the statements: “I feel I am not easily persuaded to change what I think is right”, “I stick my moral convictions”, “I feel like I change my beliefs according to who is around me [r/c]”, and “I feel like I am easily convinced to adopt the perspectives of others [r/c]”. Finally, *self-esteem* was assessed by Rosenberg’s (1989) 10-item Self-Esteem Scale (e.g., “I take a positive attitude toward myself” and “I wish I could have more respect for myself [r/c]”). Following past research (Roberts & Gotlib, 1997), participants were instructed to rate how they felt about themselves “at the present moment” to capture fluctuations in state rather than trait self-esteem. See Table 1 for reliability statistics and correlations between measures.

Results

Preliminary analysis indicated the act of refusal made participants feel significantly less apologetic than the act of apology or control; however, the apology and control conditions were not significantly different, a finding that suggests that participants felt some level of apologetic feelings at baseline. Indeed, when asked if they “actually” apologized in this situation, 61.6% of the respondents reported apologizing; however, when asked if they “wanted” to apologize, the mean and median were 4.0 (the scale midpoint; $SD = 2.5$). Although these baseline levels advocate caution when interpreting the control condition, random assignment still allows for confident causal interpretation of the results. Also note that self-reported apologetic actions did not interact with the experimental manipulations, indicating that its effects were not dependent on congruence with respondents’ past course of action. Similarly, additional measures asking participants whether or not the harm-victim desired an apology did not moderate the effect of the manipulations.

Results were obtained using regression techniques; manipulated variables were dummy coded to indicate the effect of the act of apology and (separately) the act of refusal, relative to the control condition. See Table 4 for cell means and intercell comparisons and Table 5 for the full results of the regression analyses. Results indicated that the act of refusal elicited greater feelings of power/control than the control condition. Interestingly, the act of an apology also elicited greater feelings of power/control than the control condition but was not significantly different from the act of refusal. This same pattern was also identified in feelings of value integrity; both the act of refusal and the act of an apology elicited greater feelings of value integrity than the control condition, whereas refusals and apologies did not significantly differ. However, only the act of refusal resulted in greater self-esteem relative to the control condition, whereas the act of apology fell between the two other conditions and was not significantly different from either.

Mediation was then explored using bootstrapping techniques that allow for the examination of multiple mediators and specific indirect effects with small samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). When considering the two mediators, despite the lack of a total effect, the act of apology had a significant positive indirect effect on self-esteem, through both power/control, $B = .29$, $SE = .11$ (95% CI = .09–.52), and value integrity, $B = .13$, $SE = .06$ (95% CI = .03–.27). The act of refusal also had a significant positive indirect effect on self-esteem, through both power/control, $B = .35$, $SE = .12$ (95% CI = .15–.61), and value integrity, $B = .16$, $SE = .08$ (95% CI = .05–.35), and the direct effect of refusal on self-esteem was reduced to nonsignificance when controlling for the mediators.

Discussion

Study 2 again provides evidence showing self-relevant benefits of refusing to apologize. Consistent with Study 1, participants who expressed their refusal to apologize reported greater feelings of power/control (Hypothesis 1) and value integrity (Hypothesis 2). Moreover, both feelings of power/control and value integrity predicted self-esteem, mediating the effect of the refusal (Hypothesis 3). Likewise, reactions to the act of an apology also had notable effects. Similar to a refusal, expressing an apology also enhanced feelings of greater power/control, value integrity, and (only indirectly) self-esteem. Again, these results highlight the fact that refusals do not elicit the opposite effects of apologies. Rather, there is potential for both responses to aid in self-esteem maintenance.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Taken together, the results of these two studies provide converging evidence that there can be beneficial psychological consequences for individuals who refuse to provide an apology to the victims of their harmful actions. The positive relationship between apology refusals and indices of self-worth were

Table 4. Study 2. Means and standard deviations for dependent measure scales

Measured Variable	Act of apology ($n = 72$)	Control ($n = 79$)	Act of refusal ($n = 68$)
Apologetic feelings	$2.86\ (1.41)_a$	$3.10\ (1.87)_a$	$2.28\ (1.69)_b$
Power/control	$5.58\ (1.39)_a$	$4.90\ (1.68)_b$	$5.73\ (1.35)_a$
Value integrity	$5.88\ (0.86)_a$	$5.39\ (1.18)_b$	$6.01\ (1.10)_a$
Self-esteem	$5.42\ (1.30)_{ab}$	$5.17\ (1.40)_a$	$5.74\ (1.03)_b$

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Means within rows that do not share subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$ as determined by Fisher’s least significant difference comparisons.

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Table 5. Study 2. Hierarchical regression results for dependent measures

Measured variable	Predictor	Step 1 β	Step 1 t-value	Step 2 β	Step 2 t-value
Power/control	Act of apology	.21	2.81**		
	Act of refusal	.25	3.39***		
Value integrity	Act of apology	.21	2.83**		
	Act of refusal	.27	3.58***		
Self-esteem	Act of apology	.09	1.24	−.06	−0.92
	Act of refusal	.21	2.77**	.03	0.40
	Power/control	—	—	.50	8.33***
	Value integrity	—	—	.22	3.55***

*$p < .01$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

consistent across the two methodologies. This pattern was evident when manipulating the type of event recalled in Study 1, suggesting that it is indicative of a harm-doers' authentically unapologetic feelings about a past transgression. Furthermore, this basic pattern was replicated when manipulating participants' unapologetic response in Study 2, suggesting that the findings of Study 1 were not due to confounding features of the different event types recalled and that the act of refusal had a causal impact on feelings of self-worth.

Interestingly, although parenthetical to the current investigation, these findings may provide insight into the psychological motives underlying a harm-doer's decision to withhold an apology: Why would a harm-doer refuse to apologize even when it is clear that such an apology will reduce culpability and elicit (possibly unearned) forgiveness? Because the act of refusal results in greater feelings of power/control, value integrity, and self-worth (at least in the short-term), it is reasonable to predict an individual's decision to withhold an apology may be partly motivated by basic psychological needs for autonomy (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000) and consistency (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Lecky, 1945; Steele, 1988). However, further research is needed to substantiate this suggestion.

This research broadens existing work on the feelings associated with apologies by offering evidence specific to explicit apology refusals. Past research has operationalized apologies by examining respondents' self-reported presence or absence of an apology (e.g., Exline et al., 2007). This approach, however, confounds "apology refusals" with the "absence of apologies" indicative of indecision or an inability to offer a desired apology. As a result, it is difficult to discern whether these results are driven by differences between apologies and refusals, unrealized apologetic desires, or indecision. This distinction is important, particularly if the psychology underlying apologies is different from the psychology underlying apology refusals. Interestingly, the current findings about apology refusals in particular appear to diverge from existing research reflecting on salient nonapologies, suggesting that asking participants about how they felt when they did not apologize (Exline et al., 2007) is different than asking them about how they felt when they "refused" to apologize (the current studies). The former may be driven by cases where respondents "failed" to apologize, experiences likely to be strongly influenced by the psychology of regret (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). In contrast, probing apology refusal appears to elicit unrepentant actions, albeit actions that may be aided by post hoc cognitive justification.

Notably, although the current research begins to reconcile ambiguities in the potential effects of apology refusals, it raises new questions about the consequences of apologies. In both studies, participants felt greater value integrity following an apology (either recalled or manipulated) compared with harm without apologetic action, and this had indirect consequences for self-esteem. This finding is consistent with Goffman's (1971) notion of an apology as a "splitting of the self" that serves the function of realigning the harm-doers apologetic actions with his or her idealized values, a value reaffirmation that promotes genuine self-forgiveness (Wenzel, Woodyatt, & Hedrick, in press). However, the effects of apology on feelings of power/control were not consistent across the two studies. In Study 1, recalling apologetic events elicited the same feelings of power/control as recalling inaction harm events. By contrast, in Study 2, the act of apologizing appeared to increase feelings of power/control. There are a number of possible reasons for this inconsistency. It could be that actively apologizing elicits temporary feelings of agency that eventually dissipate and thus are not reflected in recalled apologies, suggesting a need for longitudinal research. Alternatively, there may be two different processes through which apologies affect feelings of power/control (one positive and one negative), the salience of which might differ between recalled and active apologetic acts. On the one hand, apologizing may be considered a relinquishing of control to the victim (Karp, 1998; Wood & Mitchell, 1981); on the other hand, an apology could also be thought of as an active attempt to control the victim's attributions of blame (Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981). More work is needed, both theoretical and empirical, to disentangle the potential consequences of apology on feelings of power/control and the conditions that moderate those diverging effects.

The current research may be broadened in other ways as well. For example, many scholars view the provision of an apology as only one half of a dialogical process of reconciliation between the harm-doer and his or her victim (Scheff, 1998). To the contrary, the current results suggest that the expression of an apology refusal may be sufficient to elicit a more positive sense of self, even in the absence of the victim's receipt of that refusal (i.e., expressions of refusal not heard by the victim; Study 2). Although the expression of a refusal was adequate to elicit psychological effects, these effects may be amplified or change when asked to refuse an apology while the aggrieved victim is present. Moreover, the victim's subsequent response to an explicit nonapology (or failure to apologize) may also have dramatic effects on the harm-doer. These empirical questions

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beg further investigation into apology refusals while also considering the dynamic relationship between harm-doers and their victims. These relational complexities also suggest that broadening our survey of the psychological consequences of apology refusals may yield interesting and important patterns. For example, the act of refusing to apologize may be much less psychologically advantageous for harm-doers when considering relational outcomes (e.g., relationship quality, group identification, and belongingness) that are less self-focused and are more likely to capture the importance of the dialogical interplay between a harm-doer and his or her victim. Although the refusal to apologize may positively impact a harm-doer's self-oriented goals, that same refusal may negatively impact relational goals. Questions also remain about the lasting benefits of apology refusals, suggesting a need for longitudinal research aimed at identifying patterns as they develop over time. Future research should consider the broader spectrum of both self-oriented and other-oriented concerns, short-term and long-term consequences, and the impact of the dyadic interplay between harm-doer and victim.

Notwithstanding the need for further specification, the current findings are remarkable given that an apology refusal may, in some cases, reinforce commitment to antisocial behavior that has harmed another individual and is largely perceived by others to be unjust. In the current research, the heightened self-relevant perceptions of power/control and value integrity implied by the explicit act of refusing to apologize appeared to trump any potential negative effect on self-esteem resulting from the defense of harmful actions. Such findings may help to explain barriers to reconciliation and the seemingly irrational, antisocial, or callous behavior of harm-doers in real-world contexts. For example, in judicial proceedings, even when apologies are inadmissible as evidence of culpability, many offenders still refuse their counsel's suggestion to apologize despite the likelihood that it will reduce sentencing severity (Robbennolt, 2003). Within organizations, effectiveness and learning may be hindered by a leader's reluctance to admit error and take responsibility, perhaps indicative of a more fundamental tension between the organizational goals that leaders are charged with implementing and their self-oriented goals to maintain power and status (see Magee, Gruenfeld, Keltner, & Galinsky, 2004). In intergroup contexts, symbolic apologies in response to historical victimizations are a common strategy for trying to promote reconciliation (see Blatz & Philpot, 2010; Chapman, 2007; Philpot & Hornsey, 2008, 2011; Wohl, Hornsey, & Bennett, 2012), but the debate about whether or not such apologies should be conferred often becomes a major political issue, giving rise to added contention between groups. Recognition of the self-serving consequences of nonconciliatory behaviors, which may deny victims of harm psychological closure, provides much needed insight into the psychology of unrepentant harm-doers.

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