FORGIVENESS AS A FUNCTION OF OFFENSE SEVERITY, APOLOGY EXTENSIVENESS, AND PERCEIVED SINCERITY: A THEORETICAL MODEL.

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INTRODUCTION

Our daily lives are awash in public and private apologies and expressions of forgiveness. People usually apologize –both publicly and privately- because they hope that these requests for forgiveness are effective in making the world (or at least the part of the world in which they live and work) a slightly better place to be. Right or wrong, genuine or false, apologies and forgiveness seem to have an irresistible human interest and political cache (McCullough, Pargament, & Thorensen, 2000). The present paper addresses issues concerning apologies and forgiveness in the context of workplace relationships. I examine three hypothesized antecedents of forgiveness: offense severity, the content of the apology (apology elements), and the perceived sincerity of the offender's apology.

Apologies and forgiveness are two powerful and related phenomena. On the one hand, apologies are one of the prescribed procedures for resolving social conflicts. A substantial body of research supports the power of apologies in reducing the victim's negative responses to a personal offense, such as negative thoughts about offenders, and likely verbal and physical aggression toward offenders (e.g., Azar, Mullet, & Vinsonneau, 1999; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Ohbuchi, Kameda & Agarie, 1989; Scher & Darley, 1997; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). Most notably, a number of these studies have found support for the apology-forgiveness link (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Weiner *et al.*, 1991).

On the other hand, forgiveness has a potential restorative power and represents one method of repairing damaged workplace relationships in the aftermath of a personal offense (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Social scientists have only begun to study forgiveness systematically in the last 13 years (Aquino, Grover, Goldman, &

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Folger, 2003). These studies have found that in close relationships, people often choose forgiveness as a constructive alternative to retaliation (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; McCullough *et al.*, 1997; McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998; Weiner *et al.*, 1991). In spite of such claims, forgiveness has been largely ignored in management research (Kurzynsky, 1998). Three studies make the difference. In their qualitative study of workplace revenge, Bies and Tripp (1996) uncovered forgiveness as a response by some employees to restore a sense of justice. Bradfield and Aquino (1999) found forgiving behavior more likely to occur, relative to revenge behavior, when employees focused more of their thoughts and cognitive energy on forgiveness. Aquino, Bies and Tripp's (2001) recent study advances the work of Bradfield and Aquino by taking in account the role of organizational factors in the revenge and forgiveness process. Specifically, they investigated the relationship between blame, victim and offender status, and the pursuit of revenge or forgiveness after a personal offense. In summary, good reasons exists to believe that organizations fostering forgiveness can provide a foundation of trust and respect upon which positive future interactions can be built. In turn, good working relationships are essential to organizational effectiveness (Kurzinsky, 1998).

1. OFFENSE SEVERITY

In daily encounters, people often say or do things that others and even the actor themselves find careless, stupid, or offensive. These offenses often precipitate embarrassing situations that disrupt social encounters and threaten the social identities of participants. In the context of organizations, these perceived interpersonal offenses can damage working relationships (Baron & Newman, 1996).

Because the social consequences of an offense are not trivial or minor, offenders try to rectify damage done to others by apologizing. A victim appraises the apology given by the offender and decides on his or her reactions to the offender (Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Weiner *et al.*, 1991). These reactions may include forgiving or punishing the person. If the victim accepts the apology as appropriate, he or she forgives the offender, and the conflict is resolved. If not, the victim becomes aggressive and the conflict escalates.

Situational and social factors may influence the offender's use of apologies in the aftermath of an offense. Offense severity has been one situational factor studied by researchers. Boon & Sulsky (1997) found that the type of judgment an individual is asked to make may influence the way he or she weighs and combines the information that contextual cues such as offense severity provide.

Results from the above study show that offense severity is particularly important when judgments of forgiveness are under consideration. Gonzales, Manning, & Haugen (1992) point out that, unfortunately, offense severity has not been operationalized consistently across investigations. In their opinion, some investigations have confounded the offender's responsibility (i.e., the inherent wrongfulness of the act itself) and consequence severity (i.e., the severity of the consequences independent of the wrongfulness of the act that produced them). These authors suggest that those two severity factors must be disentangled in order to determine the general assessment of the severity of an offense. In the present model, offense severity is defined as an independent variable.

2. THE CONTENT OF APOLOGIES

An apology is a type of illocutionary speech act that can be performed by invoking the appropriate formula under the appropriate circumstances (Fraser, 1981). Given this definition, how does one go about making an apology? What can one say in order to apologize? Goffman (1971, p. 114) took a relatively narrow view of this question when he wrote that in apologizing, when «one runs over another's sentence, one is more or less reduced to saying some variant of 'I'm sorry.'» In contrast, Gonzales and colleagues (Gonzales et al., 1992, p. 968) indicate that «accounts after transgressions typically involve much more than a simple «'I'm sorry.'» In their opinion «language is rich, and we have at our disposal myriad accounting strategies to mitigate the damage resulting from our social sins. » From the point of view of sociopragmactic researchers, the decision to apologize places the offender in a position of decision-making: What specific realizations of the speech act of apology would, most effectively, bring about the restoration of harmony between offender and victim? (Volmer & Olhstain, 1989). In summary, the act of apologizing may be defined as containing a number of elements that can range from a perfunctory «Pardon me» used in a ritualistic manner to a full blown expression that might include complex elements of confession, remorse, guilt, and desire to make restitution.

A substantial body of research has appeared that explores the patterns of apology realization under different social constraints across a number of languages and cultures (e.g., Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Olshtain, 1983; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Trosborg, 1987). The most extensive analysis of the content of apologies has been carried out by the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). This project began as an attempt to develop a measure of socio-cultural competence in the learning of a second language, but developed into a comprehensive analysis of the realization of the

speech acts of request and apologies across cultures. The CCSARP investigation was concerned with interrelating the ways language is used to perform certain speech acts with the social and situational variables that potentially affect their use. The CCSARP project studied seven different languages and language varieties. For each of the languages studied, the investigation revealed the systematic ways in which a particular pragmatic function is achieved by language-specific linguistic means, or by language-specific choices from structures that are available in different language systems. Although the CCSARP certainly does not make any claims about the universality of the common features that the project has found in the ways native speakers realize request and apologies, it nevertheless shows that certain pragmatic regularities underlie requestive and apologizing behavior in all the languages examined (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

The CCSARP has identified four strategies that can be used to apologize. I will refer to these as the potential ingredients within an apology. In the rest of this paper, I will thus use the phrase apology elements to refer to these strategies. These four elements are an illocutionary force-indicating device (IFID) such as, «I'm sorry, » «I apologize, » or «Excuse me, » an expression of the offender's responsibility for the offense, an offer of repair, and a promise of forbearance. In data collected by the CCSARP, these elements are used frequently in apologies in a variety of languages and across a variety of cultures. These four elements, which make up the speech-act set of apology, consist of two that are general and two that are situation specific. The two general elements are the IFID, which contains the formulaic, routinized forms of apology (various apology verbs); and the expression of offender's responsibility, which relates to the offender's willingness to admit fault. Potentially, the IFID or the expression of offender's responsibility could realize an apology in any situation. These two elements, which are inherently related to the offender's willingness to express an apology, can be used across all situations that require the act of apology. The other two elements, the offer of repair and the promise of forbearance, are much more situation-dependent and can be used instead of the main ones just mentioned or in combination with them. Therefore, when the offender decides to express an apology verbally, he or she may choose one of the above-specified elements or any combination of them.

Despite this growing literature on the content of apologies, little research compares the effects of different elements people use when they apologize (Fukuno & Ohbuchi, 1998). For example, Darby and Schlenker (1982) examined the differences in children's responses to an offender who either did not apologize, gave a «perfunctory apology» («Excuse me»), a «standard apology» («I'm sorry, I feel badly about this»), or a «compensation apology» («I'm sorry, I

feel badly about this, please let me help you. ») They found that elaborate apologies resulted in the offender being forgiven more than when less elaborate apologies were used. However, although elaborate apologies are increasingly complex in the number of messages included in the apology, they do not allow an independent analysis of the effects of the different number of apology elements. More recently, Scher & Darley (1997) found that the elements people use to realize the speech of apologizing clearly have an independent effect on the judgments people make about the offender. Their results show that the addition of each element seems to have an additive effect on judgments of how appropriate the apology was and how much the offender was blamed for the offense.

Based on the apology classification carried out by the CCSARP, I define apology extensiveness –an independent variable- as the number of elements that an apology includes. Because apology extensiveness increases as the number of messages included in the apology increases, this definition allows an independent analysis of the effects of the different elements people use when they apologize.

3. PERCEIVED SINCERITY

On a methodological note, Gonzales, Haugen and Manning (1994, p. 700) indicate that «results of the current investigation serve as a reminder to researchers that *what* is said may be less important than *how* it is said when participants in social encounters confront potential interpersonal conflict. » Mitchell (1989) also suggests that the fact of the offender giving an apology might not be as important as the specific qualities of that apology. In other words,

I can assume that an important factor driving the aggression-inhibiting effects of apologies is not merely their provision, but their perceived sincerity. The relevance of sincerity may be supported on the consideration that whenever offenders «offer» something to their victims, such as an apology, victims may suspect that the offenders are trying to ingratiate themselves (Harrel, 1979). By admitting that they have committed a «bad act, » the offenders in a sense undercut the credibility of the very apology they are trying to provide. However, there is no theoretical reason to think that one type of apology will be perceived as more sincere that another (Shields, 1979). Perceived sincerity is the third independent variable that I include in the theoretical model.

4. FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is an action in response to some perceived harm or wrongdoing by another party. It has been defined as a deliberate decision by the victim to

relinquish anger, resentment, and the desire to punish a party held responsible for inflicting harm (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991; Horsbrugh, 1974; Murphy, 1988; North, 1987; Richards, 1988; Shriver, 1995). At the behavioral level, forgiveness necessarily consists of the decision to avoid harming the offender. But forgiveness does not merely substitute indifference or inactivity for revenge. Rather, the behavioral enactment of forgiveness goes beyond mere indifference to include more active efforts by the offended party to express goodwill towards the offender (Aquino et al., 2000).

Forgiveness thus can be expressed interpersonally through reconciliation, which is the attempt by the victim to restore or rebuild a damaged relationship by extending acts of goodwill toward the offender. Reconciliation refers to the extent to which the victim made an effort to repair or improve his or her relationships with the offender following the offense (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). In the theoretical model, I focus on reconciliation as the dependent variable because, as a behavioral expression of forgiveness, it is likely to have the most direct effect on ongoing organizational relationships (Aquino et al., 2001).

5. A THEORETICAL MODEL

As the review of the literature indicates, previous research suggests three topics as relevant in the study of the apology-forgiving link: offense severity, the content of the apology (apology elements), and the perceived sincerity of the offender's apology. The proposed model brings together these variables for the first time (see Figure 1). Including all three variables allows a test for the main effect of each within the same study. In addition, the following effects can also be addressed: (a) the interactive effects of apology extensiveness and offense severity on forgiveness; (b) the interactive effects of apology extensiveness and offense severity on perceived sincerity; (c) the role of perceived sincerity in partially mediating the effects of apology extensiveness, as well as in partially mediating the effects of offense severity on forgiveness. In the rest of this section, I will address each of those effects in turn.

5.1 Definition of Hypotheses

Theorists generally assume that people come to a decision about the extent to which an offender is blameworthy before they decide whether or not they are willing to forgive the offense (Droll, 1984; Flanigan, 1992). However, as Bradfield & Aquino's (1999) study shows, the more severe the offense the more blame the victims attribute to the offenders. The data from this study provide support for

their hypothesis that offense severity mitigates attributions of blame. According to this interpretation, the victim may be more likely to view forgiveness as an acceptable coping strategy when the offense is not too severe. As a consequence, the perceived severity of the offense should influence forgiving, with more severe offenses being difficult to forgive.

This reasoning leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: The more severe the offense, the less often the victim will forgive the offender

Moreover, Bennet & Earwaker (1994) found that whether an apology is perceived favorably and accepted is related to the extent of the offender's responsibility for the offense and, independently, to the seriousness of the offense. Along with that result, I argue that as offenses increase in severity, victims employ increasingly demanding criteria to assess the sincerity of the offender's apology. As a consequence, the greater the severity of the offense, the more difficult it is to perceive an apology as sincere.

This reasoning leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: The more severe the offense, the less often the victim will perceive an offender's apology as sincere.

The extensiveness of the offender's apology, as indexed by the total number of apology elements the offender includes in his apology, may be considered as an indicator of the amount of effort offenders expend to rectify an embarrassing or offensive situation. In the past some researchers have used the total number of account elements as a measure of the effort exerted by participants in accounting for their behaviors (Gonzales *et al.*, 1992; Gonzales *et al.*, 1994). Students of apologies have tended to overestimate the ability of the apology to mitigate the effects of offenses regardless of the type of apology that was offered (Shields, 1979). However, the extensiveness of the apology (number of elements) may produce differences in how the offender is perceived by the victim. The apology probably demands more effort for offenders to include various elements than to use just one throughout the apology episode.

The more effort an offender expends to apologize for the offense, the more the victim may think the offender is remorseful and concerned over what has occurred. Likewise, the more extensive the apology offered and the more the victim perceives the offender as remorseful and concerned, the more the victim

may consider forgiveness. In consequence, the extensiveness of the apology should influence forgiveness.

The preceding discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: Apology extensiveness is positively related to forgiveness.

Earlier research findings also show that elaborate apologies are always more effective that perfunctory ones in generating favorable reactions (e.g., forgiveness), even in situations in which an elaborate apology may appear excessive (Darby & Schlenker, 1982). Similarly, Schlenker & Darby (1981) show that elaborate apologies tend to be offered when the offense is severe. In the case of mild offenses, in which there is relatively little for which to apologize, offenders need not spend much time and effort in saving anyone's face.

I argue that when the offense is mild, it does not make any difference to deliver an apology low in completeness as compared to delivering another one high in completeness. In both cases, participants appear to have repented and may obtain the same average amount of forgiveness. However, in conditions of high offense severity, the offender's responsibilities for the offense increase, as do the potential negative repercussions to the offender. As a consequence, a remedial action is required, and offenders may obtain much more forgiveness when they deliver an apology high in extensiveness.

The following interaction hypothesis is based on that argument:
H4: The likelihood that greater amounts of apology extensiveness will produce greater forgiveness should be strong and significant when the severity of an offense is high. The less severe the offense, however, the more that any effect of apology-extensiveness on forgiveness should be attenuated.

Several studies (Bies, Shapiro & Cummings, 1988; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Rubin, Brockner, Eckenrode, Enright, & Johnson-George, 1980) suggest that the perceived sincerity or honesty of the account giver is another important characteristic influencing the effectiveness of social accounts in conflict situations. Darby and Schlenker (1982), for example, found that elaborate apologies increased the likelihood of the offender being viewed as genuinely sorry. In a study of dyadic negotiation, Rubin *et al.* (1980) concluded that the account offered did not have the predicted effects because the negotiator may have appeared insincere in giving such an explanation.

That is, the appearance of insincerity undermined the bargaining relationship, thus becoming a contributing factor to conflict. Finally, Bies and colleagues (1988) found that the sincerity of a boss's excuse for refusing a budget request was negatively associated with subordinates' feelings of anger, procedural injustice, and disapproval of the boss.

Therefore, only a sincere apology can apparently minimize the negative repercussions for the offender, attenuate damage to the victim's identity, and reduce negative sanctions (Goffman, 1971; Schlenker, 1980). In accordance with Darby and Schlenker's (1989) suggestion, my idea is that if the apology seems authentic and sincere, the offender does not appear as bad as the incident might otherwise suggest, because the offender seems to have repented and to not require rehabilitative punishment.

Following that reasoning, I propose the following hypothesis:

H5: Perceived sincerity is positive related to forgiveness

Unfortunately, the role of sincerity has been the subject of some confusion, especially since no research exists to complete the idea as to why some accounts are seen as sincere and why others are not (Bies *et al.*, 1988). Sociopragmactics research sheds light on this issue. From this perspective, three things seem to be important when apologizing: what is said, how it is said, and how the victims intuitively recognize the sincerity in apology variants. Volmer and Olhstain (1989), for example, specify that IFIDS can range from truly sincere expressions of regret on the offender's part that makes a «strong» apology, to a mere expression of sympathy for the victim that aims to placate the offender by acknowledging that some breach of social norm has mal-affected the victim. Bach and Harnish (1979, p. 51) define the goal of such acknowledgement as «issued not so much to express a genuine feeling as to satisfy the social expectation that such feeling be expressed. »

In other words, a weak version of an IFID is intended to satisfy social needs of etiquette and not necessarily to express genuine feelings of regret. Stronger apologies and the effect of sincerity of the IFID can be achieved primarily through internal intensification (by using adverbials within the IFID or an exclamation at the beginning of the apology: «Oh, I am very sorry») or through the choice of an apology verb that carries inherent strength of regret. In each language the speaker and the hearer intuitively recognize the IFID variants, which carry only acknowledgement features, since they are usually highly recurrent and routinized, as opposed to the strong and sincere genuine

performative verbs and their respective modal extensions (Volmer & Olhstain, 1989).

Similarly, in the case of the expression of responsibility, a continuum stretches from a high level of responsibility to a very low level of responsibility (Volmer & Olhstain, 1989). When the offender decides to use a high level of responsibility, he or she expresses great self-humiliation and dispraise of oneself (Leech, 1983) that brings about a high cost to the offender. Such speech-act behavior, however, might be safer than an alternative one in being perceived as sincere, thereby bringing about the restoration of harmony between offender and victim, since it indirectly provides benefit for victim. On the other hand, the choice of low level of responsibility is much less face-threatening to the offender, but presents the risk that the apology will not be perceived as sincere and accepted by the victim.

Additionally, a study by Scher & Darley (1997) advances the notion that elements people use to apologize have clear and independent effects on the judgments people make about the apology. The addition of each element seems to improve perceptions of the appropriateness of the apology. It seems reasonable to think that these effects also increase the likelihood that the apology will be perceived as sincere.

Based on previous arguments I propose the following hypothesis:

H6: Apology extensiveness is positively related to perceived sincerity of the apology.

Finally, I explore how offense severity may moderate the relationship between apology extensiveness and perceived sincerity of the apology. As mentioned before, elaborate apologies result in the offender being blamed less for the offense and viewed as genuinely sorry (Darby & Schlenker, 1982). Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) posit that the decision to perform the act of apologizing and then the decision to choose one or more elements is affected by a number of different factors. Some of these are socio-cultural and relate to the performance of speech acts in general, such as social distance, social power, and age. Other factors are closely connected to the situational context creating the need to apologize. Thus, the severity of the offense is, most probably, a very significant factor in the choice made by the offenders. Therefore, I argue, that when the offense is severe, an apology high in extensiveness is perceived as more sincere than an apology low in extensiveness. Also, an apology low in extensiveness seems not to differ in its effect on high-offense severity or low-offense severity; in both cases the apology is perceived nearly at the same level of sincerity.

This reasoning suggests the following hypothesis:

H7: The positive relation between offense severity and sincerity is weaker for apologies low in extensiveness as compared to apologies high in extensiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

The present paper addresses issues concerning apologies and forgiveness in the context of workplace relationships. The aim of the proposed model is contributing to the understanding of the forgiveness process in the workplace from the victim's perspective. As was mentioned before, the model combines three of the relevant antecedents of forgiveness: offense severity, apology extensiveness, and perceived sincerity of the offender's apology. Although the usefulness of forgiveness in the workplace is being increasingly described in business publications, the study of forgiveness as a strategy for resolving workplace conflicts is in its infancy (Buttler & Mullis, 2001). As a consequence, there are several avenues open for future research.

First, the theoretical model presented in this paper suggests the relevance of perceived sincerity to explain forgiveness. Further research is needed to complete the idea as to why some apologies are seen as sincere and why others are not. The model also suggests that the forgiveness process may differ depending on the severity of the offense. Therefore, future research that removes the confounding effects between the type of offense and forgiveness will help to clarify how individuals forgive different types of offenses (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002).

Second, despite the broad consensus regarding the intrinsically time-bound nature of forgiveness, modern empirical efforts have not taken time seriously as an intrinsic feature of forgiveness. Future research should explore approaches for explicating the role of time in forgiveness (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003).

Third, research might explore how the relative value of forgiveness and apologies might differ across cultures. At present, this issue is largely a matter of speculation, given that it has yet to receive systematic attention. However, given the differences that have already been found in how work relationships differ across cultures, it is likely that there are also cultural differences in how individuals are able to forgive (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004).

Fourth, another avenue for future study involves a comparison of apology with other types of responses, such as denial, which might be used for trust repair. Are some types of responses more effective for repairing trust than others, or are there

contingencies that affect whether one type of response might be preferred? (Kim *et al.*, 2004).

Fifth, examining the impact of the consequences of forgiveness is crucial for establishing its value as a conflict-reduction strategy. Although some studies have advocated the position that long-term relationships will benefit from forgiveness in the aftermath of wrongdoing, a paramount research initiative should be to establish empirically the veracity of the claim that forgiveness improves relationships in organizations (Aquino *et al.*, 2003).

Recently, researchers have begun to lament the fact that most studies of forgiveness have relied almost exclusively on monomethod measurements of forgiveness based on only a single person: the putative forgiver. To remedy the shortcoming imposed by monomethod assessment, future research should strive to complement self-reports of forgiveness from the forgiver's side of things with reports from other informants (including relationship partners), rating scales completed by third parties, or behavioral measures (McCullough *et al.*, 2000).

Finally, survey and experimental research are two of the major research techniques used to learn about behavior in organizations. Analysis of surveys using correlational techniques can be very valuable, but conclusions drawn from correlations are limited in a very important way: correlations tell us how variables relate to each other, but they do not provide any insight into their cause-and-effect relationships.

On the other hand, establishing the causal relationships between the variables is important, so researchers frequently turn to another technique that does permit such conclusions to be drawn –that is, the experiment. However, experiments tend to elicit behavior that is artificial, restrictive, and "pale" in comparison with the rich flow of behavior observed in the unrestricted, natural setting. Considering these complementary strengths and weaknesses, future research should try to make use of both techniques and comparing their results (Keppel & Saufley, 1980).

Figure1 :
A Theoretical Model: Hypotheses
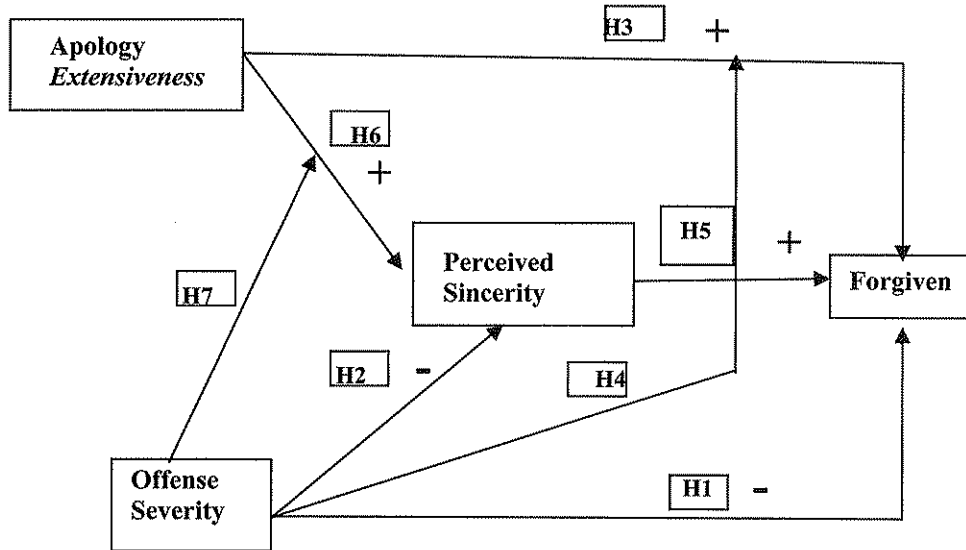
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