The Effects of Offenders’ Emotions Versus Behaviors on Victims’ Perception of Their Personality

Disentangling the Effects of Felt Guilt and Apologies

Christophe Leys, Laurent Licata, Philippe Bernard, and Cynthie Marchal

Social Psychology Unit, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

Abstract. Some people experience a feeling of guilt after transgressing a social norm, while others do not. Perceiving this emotion in others therefore yields important information about their personality. Two experimental studies assessed the effects of the victims’ perceptions of the offenders’ feelings of guilt on the victims’ judgments of the offenders’ personality. Study 1 showed that offenders perceived as experiencing guilt are viewed as being more extraverted (sociable) and more conscientious (competent) than those who are not. These results were replicated in Study 2, which further showed that the effects of perception of guilt on personality judgments are distinct from those of apologies. These effects are mediated by the victims’ perception of justice and their anger. The theoretical and practical implications of these results are discussed.

Keywords: impression formation, social judgment, guilt, apology, social emotions

What do people’s emotions tell us about them? Most emotions arise in social interactions, are triggered by a social context, and in turn influence our relationships with others (Karasawa & Mesquita, 2000; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Manstead & Semin, 1981; Mesquita, 2007; Mesquita & Albert, 2007; Rimé, Mesquita, Boca, & Philippot, 1991). According to Mesquita, Marinetti, and Delvaux (in press), emotions are fundamentally social because they are linked to intentions to act in certain ways. Perceiving and correctly interpreting other people’s emotions are, therefore, crucial for relating to them. However, social-psychological research on emotions has mainly addressed how people’s emotions influence their behavior, while fewer studies have investigated the impact of individuals’ emotions on the way they are perceived by others, although this field of research is not entirely unexplored (Forgas, 1991, 1994; Hareli & Hess, 2009; Innes-Ker & Niedenthal, 2002; Manstead & Semin, 1981; Rodogno, 2008). For example, Riggio and Friedman (1986) showed that emotionally expressive people were rated more positively on every personality dimension. They were also judged as more physically attractive and as possessing better speaking abilities than less emotionally expressive people. Hareli and Hess (2009) studied the impact of people’s anger on others’ assessment of their personality. They found that a perceiver witnessing someone’s anger reconstructs the cognitive appraisals that led this person to experience that emotion.

In this paper, we focus on one of the most social emotions: guilt. Guilt is particularly worth studying because it is deeply rooted in the social context; it is triggered by the transgression of social norms; and it is functional in implementing social control (Hareli & Parkinson, 2008). However, as we argue below, contrary to other emotions, guilt has no direct facial expression correlate, which makes it difficult to perceive. For this reason, people usually rely on apologies (i.e., behavior) to identify another person’s guilty feeling. However, we argue that, because people sometimes apologize even though they do not experience guilt, apologies cannot be used as a univocal proxy for felt guilt. However, so far, experimental studies have not clearly distinguished the effects of offenders’ guilty feelings on impression formation about their personality from those of apologies. We present two studies that demonstrate that guilt influences impression formation about offenders’ personality, and that this effect is distinct from that of apologies.
Guilt and Apologies

After experiencing an offence, people often expect reparation, whether concrete (e.g., financial compensation) or symbolic (e.g., apologies). Conversely, providing those reparations after a transgression is functional in restoring the relationship between the victim and the offender (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). This dynamic may occur in day-to-day interactions (e.g., a student being impolite to a teacher, an accidental physical contact in the street, or a professional mistake) as well as in specific domains (e.g., a court of law). Felt guilt plays a crucial role in this dynamic.

According to Tangney and Dearing (2002), guilt is a moral, self-directed, negative emotion involving internal attributions and concerns a specific behavior. It is most likely felt in interpersonal contexts after a norm has been transgressed. Yet, as stated above, people are able to conceal it. Indeed, Keltner and Buswell (1996) compared the distinctiveness of embarrassment, shame, and guilt based on facial expressions. They showed that, whereas observers were able to identify embarrassment and shame, they could not reliably label expressions of guilt. Still, felt guilt often motivates people to apologize to restore the relationship with the victim (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2006). As a consequence, victims usually rely on transgressors’ apologies to identify guilt.

Thus, several studies have assessed the influence of apologies on judgment of transgressors’ personality (Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994; Takaku, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2001). For example, Darby and Schlenker (1989) observed that apologies and remorse have a positive effect on children’s attitudes toward transgressors, and Ohbuchi et al. (1989) showed that adult respondents perceived offenders more positively when they presented apologies to the victim.

However, apologizing is not an automatic response to felt guilt; it is a controllable behavior that offenders can use to convey various messages. First, apologies can be inspired by emotions other than guilt, such as shame or pity (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Second, apologies are not necessarily associated with emotions. Indeed, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that apologies take part in what they describe as “negative politeness,” the aim of which is to avoid grieving someone. According to this view, apologizing is simply a social ritual and a mutual face-saving strategy (Goffman, 1967), which implies that offenders do not necessarily experience guilt.

From the victim’s perspective, the offender’s apologies can be interpreted as evidence of felt emotion or as mere compliance with a social convention. It is our contention that offenders’ apologies are more effective in restoring their social image when they are interpreted by the victim as expressing a genuine feeling of guilt than when they are not. Hence, as stated above, felt guilt indicates that offenders sincerely accept responsibility for their misdeed. This message should not be conveyed when apologies are not associated with felt guilt. In the latter case, apologies could be interpreted as merely a matter of formality to social norms (politeness) or empathy with the victim (pity), which should, at most, have a positive impact on perceptions of the offender’s sociability. In contrast, the perception of guilt should lead to broader inferences about the offender’s personality. In line with this argument, Hareli and Eisdikovits (2006) showed that victims are more inclined to forgive when they know that apologies are an expression of guilt or shame rather than pity. Here, we focus on the effect of felt guilt on the perception of personality and assess the respective effects of perceived felt guilt and of apologies.

Currently, the Five-Factor Model, or “Big Five” (Goldberg, 1990), is the dominant model used to describe human personality through self-assessment methods. The five factors are Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. These factors are usually measured using the NEO Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992). The NEO PI-R is designed for self-evaluation, but it has also been used successfully for evaluating another person’s personality (Abe, 2004; Kenny, 1994). Among the five factors, Conscientiousness and Extraversion are particularly relevant for assessing the effects of the presence or absence of offenders’ felt guilt on perceptions of their personality. Indeed, recent research has converged on two fundamental dimensions underlying social judgment, so that some authors refer to them as “the Big Two in social judgment and behavior”: warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Ybarra et al., 2008). Therefore, although other Big Five factors might also be affected, we selected the two personality factors that relate more closely to these dimensions of social judgment. The extraversion dimension is closely related to sociability and comprises the warmth trait, while the conscientiousness dimension is closely related to competence and comprises the competence trait (Matthews, Deary, & Whiteman, 2003; see Methods section). We expect the perception of felt guilt to have a positive impact on judgments of the offender’s personality on both dimensions.

This paper reports two studies. Study 1 investigates the effect of the presence or lack of felt guilt (on the part of the offender) on the victim’s impression of the offender’s personality. The aim is to examine whether information about the target’s emotional state could have an impact when the apology behavior is not mentioned. Study 2 was designed for three purposes: (1) to replicate the results of Study 1; (2) to disentangle the effects of the feeling of guilt from those of apologies; and (3) to investigate two possible mediators – the victim’s perception of injustice and the victim’s anger that was triggered by the offence (the theoretical rationale for investigating these potential mediators are explained when Study 2 is introduced).
Study 1

Hypotheses

We derived two hypotheses from the above arguments: After an offender’s transgression, the victim perceives the offender as being more extraverted if the offender experiences guilt (Hypothesis 1: H1); the victim perceives the offender as being more conscientious if the offender experiences guilt (Hypothesis 2: H2).

Participants

A group of 72 high school students (38 women and 34 men; M_{age} = 16.74, SD = .94) were asked to voluntarily participate in the study. They belonged to five classes of 16 students. Two incomplete questionnaires were discarded.

Procedure

Under the researcher’s supervision, the teacher distributed the questionnaire in class. Different versions of the questionnaire, which corresponded to the three conditions (With Guilt; Without Guilt; Control, see below), were randomly distributed in each classroom.

The participants were to successively read three short stories (one per experimental condition), all based on the same pattern: They take place in a professional setting and describe an offence (i.e., a ski instructor breaking his student’s leg during a descent; a teacher arriving 1 h late and refusing to give the students the reward they were entitled to; and a supermarket cashier chatting with her colleague while the client is waiting to be served), as well as some information about the offender (see Appendix for examples). While reading the scenarios, participants were asked to picture themselves as the victim. Dependent variables were measured after each scenario.

There were three within-subject experimental conditions presented in the scenarios: the offender feels guilty after the offence – that is, “She feels very guilty” (Guilt condition: G); guilt is explicitly described as absent – that is, “She does not feel guilty at all” (no Guilt condition: nG); or no information is provided regarding guilt (Control condition: Ctrl). The information about guilt was given at the beginning, the middle, or the end of the story as a function of the scenario (see Appendix). To avoid a scenario effect and to avoid potential order effects, scenarios and conditions were cross-linked. Three scenarios can be permuted in six possible orders. Six more possible permutations exist to order the three conditions. This led to 36 (6 × 6) possible questionnaires. As the sample included 72 subjects, two questionnaires of each type were used. Apart from the manipulation of guilt, every other piece of information remained stable across conditions.

Results

As we wanted to test a priori hypotheses, we contrasted the conditions (Brauer & McClelland, 2005; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985). Polynomial contrast analyses with repeated measures (Howell, 1999) were carried out on each of the dependent variables with the following contrast coefficients for conditions nG, Ctrl, and G, respectively: –1, 0, and 1 (linear) and –1, 2, and –1 (quadratic). As the order of scenarios and conditions was counterbalanced, it could not affect the design. However, both variables were controlled as between-subjects variables to improve statistical power (Keppel, 1991). Following our hypotheses, we expected to find a significant linear contrast for extraversion (H1) and conscientiousness (H2), but we did not expect the quadratic contrast to reach significance as that would indicate that the Ctrl condition does not occupy a linear position between the nG and G conditions.

The results (see Table 1) confirmed H1: The linear contrast on the extraversion dimension was significant, show-
Uncorrected proofs not for distribution

ing that an offender who feels guilty was seen as more extraverted than one who does not (see Figure 1). However, the quadratic contrast was also significant, indicating a nonlinear position of the Control condition, although the magnitude of this contrast was very low. In order to remove any uncertainty regarding the position of the Ctrl condition, we ran a MANOVA analysis with the order of the conditions and the order of scenarios as between-subjects factors and condition as a within-subject factor. It revealed a significant effect of condition, $F(2, 68) = 26.15, p < .01$. We computed a posthoc test with a Bonferroni correction: The values of extraversion in the G condition differed from those in the nG and Ctrl conditions ($p < .01$), and the Ctrl condition differed from the nG condition, though only marginally ($p = .08$). Thus, the presence of felt guilt led to a significant increase in the perception of extraversion, whereas the lack of guilt tended to have the opposite effect. In line with H2, perceptions of the offender’s conscientiousness followed the same pattern.

These results are consistent with the idea that feeling guilty allows individuals to communicate to their social environment that, after having transgressed a social norm, they are aware of the wrongdoing and recognize the validity of the social norm that they have transgressed. They are then perceived as possessing positive personality traits – extraversion and conscientiousness – that guarantee their place as group members.

In Study 1, we manipulated the offenders’ guilty feelings by clearly stating that they did or did not experience guilt. This allowed us to manipulate presence of guilt without having to rely on its supposed correlates such as apologies or nonverbal cues. Study 2 was designed to replicate these results as well as to clearly differentiate between the effects of guilt and those of apologies. This was done in order to ascertain that the results of Study 1 can be interpreted unambiguously as the effect of the perception of another person’s emotions on judgments about their personality.

**Study 2**

As argued above, apologies should not be conflated with felt guilt. Apologizing is an interaction ritual and not always linked with a real experience of guilt. Consequently, apologies should only have a positive impact on different dimensions of impression formation to the extent that observers infer felt guilt from them. When they do not infer felt guilt from an apology, it is interpreted as a mere observance of social convention (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967), which should only affect their perception of the offender’s social skills. In Study 2, we reproduced the same experimental setting but added an apology factor to disambiguate the effects of emotion perception from those of behavior perception. Information about the offender’s feeling of guilt, either alone or in conjunction with an apology, should have a positive effect on impression formation, whereas an apology should only affect impression formation when associated with guilt. In addition, Study 2 was designed to test a path model including the victims’

---

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV/IV</th>
<th>$M_{nG}$ (SD)</th>
<th>$M_{Ctrl}$ (SD)</th>
<th>$M_G$ (SD)</th>
<th>Contrast</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>$F(1, 34)$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>Explained variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>2.55 (.98)</td>
<td>2.92 (1.00)</td>
<td>3.80 (.92)</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>53.79</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quad</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>5.31</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>2.69 (.81)</td>
<td>2.93 (.78)</td>
<td>3.11 (.77)</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quad</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. *Dependent variables (DV) vs. Independent variable (IV). Linear contrast (−1, 0, 1); quadratic contrast (−1, 2, −1). The proportion of variance explained by the significant contrast was obtained by dividing the sum of squares of the contrast by the total sum of squares of all contrasts. Please explain use of bold!
perception of injustice and their anger as potential mediators of the effect of perceived felt guilt on the victims’ evaluation of the offender’s personality.

Indeed, the means by which perceived felt guilt influences the impression that the victim forms about the offender remains unknown. However, research conducted in this field suggests that a perception of injustice and anger may mediate the effect on impression formation of a perception of perceived felt guilt or an apology.

First, there is evidence that failing to feel guilty or to apologize after an offence leads the victim or witnesses to appraise the situation as being unjust. O’Malley and Greenberg (1983) showed that perceiving wrongdoers’ guilty feelings restores one’s perception of justice because it reinstates them as “social beings” acting in line with their community’s normative framework (see also Darby & Schlenker, 1989, on apologies). Ohbuchi et al. (1989) also showed that offenders’ apologies lower the perception of injustice and the anger triggered by the transgression among other group members, whether victims or bystanders (see also Harris, Walgrave, & Braithwaite, 2004; Van Stokkom, 2002). However, it is our contention that the effects of apologies are attributable to the fact that people infer felt guilt from apologies.

Second, evidence also exists that the perception of injustice elicits anger. For example, Mikula, Scherer, and Athenstead (1998) showed, from a sample of 2,921 students from 37 countries, that anger-producing events were most frequently perceived as very unfair and unjust (see also Hogan & Dickstein, 1972; Mohiyeddini & Schmitt, 1997; Scher & Heise, 1993; Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999). Finally, it has been shown that emotions felt by perceivers affect their judgment of another person (Innes-Ker & Niedenthal, 2002). For example, angry victims tend to judge their offender more negatively and to rely more on stereotypes (Bodenhausen, Sheppard, & Kramer, 1994; Keltner, Ellsworth, & Edwards, 1993).

Therefore, we expect to find that the presence or absence of offenders’ guilty feelings affects the victims’ appraisal of the situation as being just or unjust, and that this appraisal determines the level of anger felt by the victim, which in turn influences the victim’s evaluation of the offenders’ personality.

Hypotheses

First, the two hypotheses tested in Study 1 are tested in Study 2: Perceptions of felt guilt or lack of felt guilt should have a positive or negative impact, respectively, on the victims’ judgment of the offender’s extraversion (H1) and conscientiousness (H2). Second, the described link between the victims’ perception of injustice and their anger led us to predict that the victims’ perception of injustice (H3) and their anger (H4) are lower when offenders feel guilty and higher when they do not. In contrast, apologies, which only indicate compliance with social conventions when dissociated from guilt, only influence the victims’ perception of the transgressor’s social skills (H5).

Finally, we expect to observe the following causal chain leading to the effects on impression formation: The victims’ perception of offenders’ felt guilt (vs. its absence) decreases (vs. increases) the victims’ perception of injustice following the offense. The victims’ perception of injustice predicts their level of anger, which has a negative influence on the their perception of the offender’s extraversion and conscientiousness (H6).

Participants

A sample of 110 first-year psychology students (95 women and 15 men) at Université Libre de Bruxelles completed a questionnaire in return for course credit. Their average age was 20.12 years (SD = 2.69).

Procedure

The questionnaire was similar to the one used in Study 1. However, apologies was introduced as a new independent variable. This led to a two (Guilt vs. no Guilt) × 2 (Apologies vs. no Apologies) within-subjects experimental design. A fifth control condition in which no information was provided regarding apologies or felt guilt was introduced as a baseline for comparison. For the sake of clarity, we coded the different conditions according to the following principles: The first capital letter represents apology and is coded A if present and nA if not; the second capital letter stands for felt guilt, coded as in Study 1: G if present and nG if not; Ctrl stands for Control condition. Therefore, there were five conditions: nAnG, AnG, Ctrl, nAG, and AG.

Due to there being five conditions in Study 2, we needed to develop two more scenarios (a computer engineer unable to fix a computer on time and an accountant unable to fill out a tax statement). Again, participants were asked to picture themselves as the victim. We created five cross-linked questionnaires with the following two rules: (1) each scenario had to be associated once with each condition; and (2) each scenario and each condition had to be presented once at each position from the first to the fifth. This procedure ensured that the order of scenarios and conditions would not influence the results.

In each scenario, the apologies variable was introduced in the same sentence as the guilt variable. For example, in the cashier scenario, the conditions were presented as follows: “She feels very guilty ( . . . ), but does not apologize and . . . ” (nAG); “She feels very guilty, ( . . . ) apologizes profusely and . . . ” (AG); “Although she does not feel guilty, ( . . . ), she apologizes profusely and . . . ” (AnG); “She does not feel guilty or apologize ( . . . ) and . . . ” (nAnG); no information about felt guilt or an apology was provided (Ctrl).
Measures

The measures used in Study 1 were also used in Study 2 (see Appendix). In addition, two items that explicitly assess sociability (“S/he possesses excellent social skills”) and competence (“S/he has very good technical skills”) were added to make sure that our measure of extraversion relates to the warmth dimension and that our measure of conscientiousness relates to the competence dimension usually used in impression formation research (Fiske et al., 2007). The measures of both extraversion (.86 ≤ α ≤ .90), including the new sociability item, and of conscientiousness (.75 ≤ α ≤ .86), including the new competence item, proved to be reliable. This tends to confirm our interpretation of extraversion as closely related to warmth and of conscientiousness as related to competence. The victim’s perception of injustice and anger were assessed straightforwardly: “When picturing yourself as the victim, did you feel angry?” and “When reading the scenario, did you perceive any injustice?” on 5-point Likert scales ranging from totally disagree to totally agree. Again, no participant guessed the aims of the study.

Results

As in Study 1, we used a repeated-measures design with guilt and apology as within-subject factors and the order of scenarios and conditions were controlled for as between-subjects variables. Contrast analyses (see Table 2 for the coefficients) were used to test the differential effects of guilt and apology on the dependent variable. Instead of polynomial contrasts, another set of contrasts that obeys the usual requirements was used (contrasts are mutually independent and the sum of each contrast’s coefficients is zero). These contrasts attribute equal weight to each condition (except for the Control condition) because we did not hypothesize that the effects of felt guilt and of an apology would have similar sizes or be cumulative. These contrasts are thus more conservative than polynomial contrasts. The first contrast tests the effect of guilt and the second tests the effect of an apology. The third compares the Control condition to all other conditions, and the last one compares the extreme situations (nAnG and AG) to the mixed situations (AnG and nAG). This last contrast is irrelevant and should not be significant. H1 to H4 would be supported if the first contrast is significant. H5 would be supported if the second (apology) contrast is significant for extraversion, but not for the other dimensions. H6 is tested via structural equation modeling (see below).

Figure 2 presents participants’ perception of injustice and their anger as a function of conditions. Figure 3 presents the victim’s perception of the wrongdoers’ person-

---

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coefficients of contrast matrix, Study 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nAnG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt vs. No guilt (C1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology vs. No apology (C2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control vs. Others (C3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremes vs. Intermediates (C4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. nAnG – No Apology, no Guilt; AnG – Apology, no Guilt; Ctrl – Control; nAG – No Apology, Guilt; AG – Apology, Guilt.
Results of contrast analysis – Study 2

Table 3
Means and standard deviations of the dependent variables – Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV</th>
<th>nAnG</th>
<th>AnG</th>
<th>Ctrl</th>
<th>nAG</th>
<th>AG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>2.77 (.96)</td>
<td>3.05 (.93)</td>
<td>3.11 (1.08)</td>
<td>3.01 (1.01)</td>
<td>3.49 (.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>2.79 (.80)</td>
<td>2.83 (.82)</td>
<td>2.84 (.86)</td>
<td>2.90 (.68)</td>
<td>3.07 (.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of injustice</td>
<td>3.23 (1.44)</td>
<td>3.03 (1.44)</td>
<td>2.83 (1.36)</td>
<td>2.93 (1.42)</td>
<td>2.82 (1.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>3.85 (1.23)</td>
<td>3.77 (1.18)</td>
<td>3.65 (1.15)</td>
<td>3.72 (1.23)</td>
<td>3.48 (1.33)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. nAnG – No Apology, no Guilt; AnG – Apology, no Guilt; Ctrl – Control; nAG – No Apology, Guilt; AG – Apology, Guilt.

Table 4
Results of contrast analysis – Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sums of squares</th>
<th>$F(1, 105)$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>Explained variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 Guilt</td>
<td>48.45</td>
<td>21.47</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 Apology</td>
<td>62.63</td>
<td>24.48</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 Ctrl vs. Rest</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4 Alternates</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 Guilt</td>
<td>14.27</td>
<td>8.98</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 Apology</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 Ctrl vs. Rest</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4 Alternates</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of injustice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 Guilt</td>
<td>28.51</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 Apology</td>
<td>10.51</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 Ctrl vs. Rest</td>
<td>12.51</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4 Alternates</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1 Guilt</td>
<td>19.23</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 Apology</td>
<td>10.51</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 Ctrl vs. Rest</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4 Alternates</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Swiss J. Psychol. 71 (4) © 2012 Verlag Hans Huber, Hogrefe AG, Bern

H1 predicted a positive effect of perceived felt guilt on the perception of extraversion. This was confirmed as the first contrast, which compared the Guilt to the no-Guilt condition on this dimension, was significant. H2 postulated a positive effect of guilt on conscientiousness was also confirmed by the significant first contrast on conscientiousness. H3 and H4 were confirmed as well as guilt negatively and significantly affected the participants’ perception of injustice and, similarly, of anger: The first contrast was significant for both dependent variables. H5 predicted that the apology would significantly influence extraversion, but not the other dimensions. In line with this hypothesis, the apology contrast was only significant for extraversion. This suggests that both guilt and apology positively affect this dimension of personality perception.

When dissociated from felt guilt, the apology did not influence any variable except extraversion. In contrast, knowing that offenders feel guilty was sufficient to alter the victim’s perception of injustice and feeling of anger as well as perception of the transgressor’s extraversion and conscientiousness.

Finally, H6 predicted that the effects of guilt on the evaluation of personality traits (extraversion and conscientiousness) would be mediated by the appraisal of the situation (perception of injustice) and by the victim’s ensuing anger. We carried out structural equation modeling (SEM) analyses using the maximum likelihood method (Kline, 2005) and AMOS 7.0. We created two sets of contrasting variables: Guilt conditions versus No-Guilt conditions (equivalent to the first contrast in Table 2) and Apology conditions versus No-Apology conditions (equivalent to the second contrast in Table 2). The computed contrasted variables were perception of injustice, anger, extraversion, and conscientiousness.

The covariation between perturbations of extraversion and conscientiousness variables was included in the model. Indeed, as the design was within-subjects, and as these dimensions are not supposed to be independent (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005), there was no reason to believe that the perturbations would be independent. We examined the usual indicators of fit (Bentler, 1990; Kline, 2005). These analyses (see Figure 4 and Table 5) yielded a satisfactory fit for the guilt contrast, but not for the apology contrast. Indeed, for the guilt contrast, the $\chi^2$ and RMSEA values were not significantly different from 0, the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), and normed fit index (NFI) values were all above .90, and this model had a lower Akaike information criterion (AIC) value than the model based on the apology contrast. The nonnormed fit index (NNFI) value for the guilt contrast was .89, which is acceptable, considering the fact that all other indicators were satisfactory. These results show that perceived felt guilt decreased the victims’ perception of injustice, which attenuated their anger, which then altered their perception of the offender’s personality in a positive direction. An apology, on the other hand, did not trigger a causal chain like this.
Discussion

Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1: Participants’ judgments of the offender’s personality (extraversion and conscientiousness) were more positive when the offender felt guilty. Moreover, the victims’ perception of injustice and their anger decreased when the offender felt guilty.

In contrast, apologies only had a significant effect on extraversion. As stated in introduction, in some situations, apologies can be viewed as conformity to social norms (politeness). This explanation would account for our results in the sense that, in the AnG condition, although transgressors failed to feel guilty, they expressed an apology, therefore complying with social norms. This prevented them from being significantly discredited on social dimensions of their personality (as compared to the Control condition).

The test of the causal model predicted by H6 allowed us to further confirm this assertion. We proposed the following model to account for the effects of perceived felt guilt on impression formation: After the offense, victims appraise the situation as being unjust then triggers the victims’ anger. Anger then results in the victims assessing the wrongdoers as being less extraverted and conscientious. The results of Study 2 proved to be compatible with this model.

General Discussion

In the introduction, guilt was defined as a complex moral emotion triggered after the transgression of a social norm. Felt guilt induces the will to repair the damage done, either concretely by offering compensation or symbolically by apologizing. From the victim’s perspective, perceiving this emotion in offenders should, therefore, positively influence their perception of the offender’s personality. Both studies confirmed that the perception of felt guilt had a significant positive impact on judgments of offenders’ personality on two fundamental dimensions: extraversion and conscientiousness. Conversely, transgressors perceived as not feeling guilty tend to be seen as introverted and lacking conscientiousness.

However, it is necessary to distinguish between the effects of perceived felt guilt and those of perceived apologies. We predicted that offenders’ apologies, in and of themselves, would only have a positive impact on the dimension of offenders’ personality that is directly related to sociability (i.e., extraversion), whereas perceived felt guilt would have a more profound impact. More specifically, perceiving felt guilt should affect the victim’s (1) appraisals (i.e., perception of injustice); (2) emotions (anger); and (3) evaluation of the offender’s personality on both dimensions (i.e., extraversion and conscientiousness). The results of Study 2 confirmed those hypotheses. Furthermore, these results allowed us to establish a causal model linking perception of felt guilt to changes in personality perception: Perceiving felt guilt results in a perception of the situation as being less unjust; this leads to the victim feeling less angry, which, in turn, improves the victim’s perception of the offender’s personality. In contrast, apologies did not trigger this causal chain.

Hence, the results suggest that when apologies are associated with felt guilt, they may improve the perception of
the offender’s social skills, probably to the extent that they are viewed as conforming with social norms (politeness). However, the impact of apologies is less profound than that of perception of felt guilt, as they do not affect judgment on the other dimension of personality.

Although the results of these two independent studies confirmed our hypotheses, there were three methodological limitations. First, the experimental setting used in both studies lacks ecological validity. Since, unlike primary emotions, guilt is not clearly associated with facial or other nonverbal expressions, and since our aim was to dissociate it from the expression of an apology, we manipulated guilt by explicitly stating that offenders did, or did not, experience it. Real-life situations are less clear. People do not have direct access to the emotional states of others; they must interpret various verbal, nonverbal, and behavioral cues, which are embedded in complex social situations, to infer other people’s emotional states. Apologizing is probably the most direct way to convey a sense of guilt. However, people are generally aware that apologies can be expressed in the absence of a guilty feeling. When someone apologizes for an offence, victims may make inferences in order to decide whether the apology was sincere or not, possibly by relying on contextual or nonverbal cues, or on the offender’s behavior (i.e., reparations). Our results suggest that victims conclude that offenders are sincere when they infer that they are really experiencing guilt because we found that they are then perceived more positively on both dimensions of social judgment. A situation in which people would infer the presence of felt guilt in the absence of an apology, such as the one we created in the laboratory, is less plausible in real-life situations. However, artificially manipulating felt guilt independently of apologies was a necessary step for reaching these conclusions.

Second, we relied on the fact that participants would identify with the victim. Although the results on measures of participants’ emotions tend to confirm that they were able to do so, studies using more realistic situations are needed to ascertain the robustness of the present findings.

Finally, the validity of our measures of anger and feelings of injustice, assessed as single items, could be questioned. Although the objection is sound, these items were very explicit and could hardly be confounded with other variables.

Beyond their obvious implications for interpersonal relationships, the effects of offenders’ emotions on impression formation about their personality could also be envisioned at the group level. As argued above, extraversion and conscientiousness are germane to the two fundamental dimensions of social judgment: warmth and competence (we verified this conceptual proximity in Study 2). According to Judd et al. (2005), perception of warmth relates to major concerns about the target’s awareness of and compliance with group norms, while perception of competence is related to major concerns about the target’s ability to contribute to group prosperity. Both dimensions are, thus, essential to group survival. In line with this view, our results suggest that feeling guilty could facilitate the social (re)integration of offenders by restoring their social image as worthy group members. Conversely, as failing to experience guilt has detrimental effects on others’ perception of their personality, it could lead to their social exclusion.

The normative dimension of the experience and communication of social emotions has several concrete and important implications. First, it could play a role in the dynamic of impression formation in situations of intercultural contacts. The management of guilt and apologies varies as a function of culture, as outlined by Mesquita and Markus (2004). Hence, the breaking of informal norms in situations in which one is implicitly expected to feel guilty and express an apology might lead to negative judgments from victims and from third parties. Recent studies tend to confirm this contention (Leys, 2011). This might, in turn, deteriorate their relationships and even lead to generalizations, creating or confirming negative stereotypes. We also envision a vast application domain in the court of law as the perception of an offender’s remorse and sincerity can weigh on a trial’s dynamics and, therefore, on the severity of sentencing (Borgida & Fiske, 2008; Leys, Licata, [in refs Marchal], & Bernard, 2011).

Correct spelling is Marchal.

References


---

Christophe Leys
Université Libre de Bruxelles
Social Psychology Unit
CP 122
Avenue F. Roosevelt 50
BE-1050 Brussels
Belgium
cleys@ulb.ac.be