# Effects of Objective and Subjective Account Components on Forgiving

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ABSTRACT. The authors explored the effects of the components of a harm-doer's account of her transgression on the victims' emotional reactions to the transgression and to the character traits that she attributes to the harm-doer. Participants were 480 people whom the authors asked to imagine an incident in which they were harmed by the careless behavior of a friend. Subsequently, the authors offered participants an account of the harm-doer. In a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects design, the authors manipulated 5 account components: Admitting Fault, Admitting Damage, Expressing Remorse, Asking for Pardon, and Offering Compensation. The authors measured the participants' perceptions of these components. Results indicated that (a) the subjective perception of account components occurs schematically so that components are implicitly perceived without being objectively present, (b) objective components affect victims' reactions via subjective perceptions of these components, (c) personality factors (Irreconcilability, Interpersonal Trust, and Trait Anger) affect victims' reactions directly. Finally, certain configurations of account components are more effective than others. Specifically, asking for pardon had an effect on forgiving only when it was combined with an acknowledgment of the damage and a compensation offer. This result suggests that in this situation, the victim perceives a harm-doer's asking for pardon without the other components as an insincere apology.

Key words: apology, cognitive script, forgiving, schematic perception

A SENSE OF INJUSTICE frequently originates in victims when a harm-doer behaves improperly after an offense (Miller, 2001). Victims expect an excuse, a justification, or an apology from the harm-doer. If the harm-doer fails to give an acceptable account, the victim will feel unfairly treated and react with anger and moral indignation (Schönbach, 1990). Excuses, justifications, and apologies reduce the victim's negative emotion (Bobocel & Farrell, 1996; Folger & Martin, 1986; Sitkin & Bies, 1993) by implicitly communicating respect, remorse, and care for the victim (Tedeschi & Nesler, 1993). The healing effect of an account depends on how it was composed (Bies, Shapiro, & Cummings, 1988).

In the present research, we explored how justifications and apologies have to be phrased and framed to render them acceptable to the victims. More specifically, we aimed our study at exploring in more detail the single and joint effects of account components on forgiving. Previous researchers have pursued the same goal. Schlenker and Darby (1981) presented account components to participants who then rated the appropriateness of each component. Ohbuchi, Kameda, and Agarie (1989) asked participants to identify with a victim and to indicate how strong they thought the victim's desire was to hear several account components such as an expression of remorse. In both studies, judgments of appropriateness were obtained for each component separately. That procedure is unable to reveal whether some combinations of account components are more acceptable and effective than other combinations. Consider the following examples, which demonstrate why it is important to explore joint effects of components on the perception of appropriateness of an account. First, asking for pardon may be a necessary element of an apology. If victims feel that this element is missing, they may not be willing to forgive the harm-doer, even if they perceive other elements to be present in his or her account. Second, expressing remorse and offering compensation may have main effects on forgiveness, but when provided together, they could have a synergistic effect that exceeds the sum of their main effects. Third, asking for pardon without offering compensation may be interpreted by the victim as insincere. Interactions in combinations such as these can only be identified if account components are manipulated as independent variables rather than dependent ones. In the present study, we manipulated them in that way.

According to Goffman (1959, 1967), an appropriate apology consists of seven elements: (a) the expression of concern for the victim's suffering, (b) the acknowledgment of the rule being violated, (c) the approval of sanctions, (d) the nonapproval of one's own behavior, (e) the dissociation from the misdeed, (f) the affirmation of obeying the rule in the future, and (g) the offer of compensation for the deed. Similar components have been proposed in impression management theory (Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi & Nesler, 1993; Tedeschi & Riess, 1981) and in Schönbach's (1990) Theory Of Account Episodes. The common denominator of this literature and empirical studies on the appropriateness of accounts (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Schlenker & Darby; 1981) suggests that five components are most important for making an account appear sincere and be convincing and effective: (a) admitting fault, (b) admitting damage, (c) expressing

remorse, (d) asking for pardon, and (e) offering compensation. In the present study, we manipulated these components.

Manipulating account components objectively as independent variables may, however, create a serious validity problem. Accounts are cognitive scripts (Schank & Abelson, 1977; Schönbach, 1990), which may drive perceptions of account components to some extent. As a consequence of *schematic perception*, a subjectively perceived account may not match the account's objective content. Possibly, the victim will add account components that were not objectively provided by the harm-doer to obtain a gestalt-like account. Given this possibility, in the present study, a *first specific goal* was to explore how accurately victims perceive objective account components. We predicted three kinds of distortions as consequences of conventional social practice and communication rules. First, from an offer of compensation, the victim might infer that the harm-doer admitted his or her fault or that the harm-doer felt guilty although the harm-doer did not actually do so or feel in that way. Harm-doers sometimes appease the injured party by offering compensation even though they feel innocent. Second, victims may infer from the harm-doer's asking for pardon that he also feels a sense of remorse, whereas in truth, the harm-doer might not have expressed remorse explicitly but only asked for pardon to get away without sanctions. Third, victims will infer remorse from the harm-doer's admitting fault. Such a schematic distortion is likely because someone who has admittedly harmed someone else is expected to regret his harmful behavior and to display compassion for the injured person.

Testing these ideas requires a distinction between *objective* and *subjective* account components. We varied objective account components experimentally; subjective account components were measured by asking our participants for each component, whether it was contained in the harm-doer's account, and how strong it was. Both objective and subjective account components served as predictors for participants' reactions to the harm-doer and the harmful act. We predicted that subjective account components will affect victims' reactions directly, whereas objective account components will affect them only indirectly via subjective perception. Testing this assumption was a *second specific goal* of our research.

The harm-doer's phrasing of excuses and apologies are most likely not the only factors influencing victims' reactions. Victims differ in their personalities, and these differences might affect their reactions to a harm-doer both directly and indirectly via the interpretation of accounts. A *third specific goal* of our research was to determine the effects of personality factors that can be linked theoretically with reactions of victims: *irreconcilability, interpersonal trust,* and *trait anger*. Maes (1994) defined irreconcilability as a favorable attitude toward harsh punishment for transgressions. Individuals with low scores on this trait tend to forgive easily, whereas individuals with high scores want to get even. We considered interpersonal trust (Rotter, 1980) because being victimized challenges the person's belief in the trustworthiness of others. Interpersonal trust should covary with the tolerance for such challenges. We included trait anger because anger is the most typical reaction to

injustice (Mikula, Scherer, & Athenstaedt, 1998). We predicted that interpersonal trust would lead to more favorable perceptions of accounts and would enhance forgiveness, whereas irreconcilability and trait anger would make negative reactions to the harmful event and the harm-doer more likely.

We divided the variables of our study into four groups as follows: (a) Victim's reactions to the harm-doer and her account are the final outcome, (b) *subjective* representations of account components are direct predictors of the final outcome, (c) *objective* account components are causal antecedents of subjective account components, and (d) personality variables are expected to affect subjective account components and reactions to the harm-doer and her account.

## METHOD

### Sample and Procedure

We collected data from 480 participants (263 women, 217 men). The sample consisted of 1st-year psychology students and a demographically heterogeneous group of nonstudents. The nonstudents were older and had a lower socioeconomic status than did the students.

We distributed the questionnaire to the students in class and to the other participants via regular mail. Data collection maintained anonymity. Ages ranged from 15 years to 74 years ($M = 29$ years, $SD = 11.05$ years).

### Questionnaire, Scenario, and Experimental Design

We gave participants a booklet that consisted of the scenario and the questionnaire.

### Personality Scales

The first part of the booklet contained the trait scales. Irreconcilability was measured with Maes's (1994) scale (e.g., "Being too forgiving is a sign of weakness"; $\alpha = .66$). We measured Interpersonal Trust with a German version (Krampen, Viebig, & Walter, 1982) of Rotter's (1980) Interpersonal Trust Scale ($\alpha = .72$). Trait Anger was measured with the German STAXI (Schwenkmezger, Hodapp, & Spielberger, 1992; $\alpha = .77$).

### Scenario

The second part of the questionnaire contained the following scenario:

A good friend of yours has asked you if she could borrow your bicycle for a day. You agree but urge her to treat the bicycle with care. You explain to her that although your

bike is old, you are emotionally attached to it and have many memories associated with it. Your friend does not return your bike in the evening. You are worried and call her several times. Eventually, she answers the phone and gives you the following report: […]

### Experimental Design and Manipulation of Objective Account Components

The scenario continued with the friend's report on what had happened:

After I came back from the trip, I bought myself an ice-cream in a café. I did not lock the bike because I thought I would be back in a minute and no one would steal the bike in the meantime. When I left the café, I was horrified to detect that the bike was gone. Someone must have stolen it while I got ice-cream.

After this confession in the scenario, the friend continued with an account. The account contained up to five components. We treated each component as a between-subjects factor with two levels (component included vs. component not included). All five factors were fully crossed. Accordingly, we constructed 32 scenarios with different accounts.

*Admitting Fault—Objectively (AFo)*

Accounts representing the fault condition contained the following statement: "This was clearly my mistake—I should have paid more careful attention to your bike!" This sentence did not appear in the no-fault condition.

*Admitting Damage—Objectively (ADo)*

Participants in the *damage* condition came across the following statement: "I know your bike means a lot to you; you told me how much you loved it." This statement did not appear in the no-damage condition.

*Expressing Remorse—Objectively (ERo)*

Harm-doers in the remorse condition said, "I feel really sorry for what I have done. I know how you feel now." In the no-remorse condition, the harm-doer did not express remorse.

*Asking for Pardon—Objectively (APo)*

In the asking-for-pardon condition, the harm-doer said to the victim, "I wish you could forgive me—I apologize for what I have done." In the *no-asking-for-pardon* condition, this phrase did not appear.

*Offering Compensation—Objectively (OCo)*

In the compensation condition of this factor, the harm-doer offered that she "… could go and see if I can get you another bike if you want me to." No such offer was made in the no-compensation condition of this factor.

As a consequence of fully crossing these five factors, 1 scenario contained no account element, 5 scenarios contained one account element, 10 scenarios contained two account elements, 10 scenarios contained three elements, 5 scenarios contained four elements, and 1 scenario contained all five elements. Elements always appeared in the order of the factors.

We assigned 15 participants randomly to each of the 32 experimental conditions. A between-subjects design was employed to minimize demand characteristics. If we had presented several scenarios, participants would have noticed that scenarios differed in the number and combination of account components. This awareness would have increased the risk of artificial contrasts between the scenarios.

## Measuring Subjective Account Components

The third part of the questionnaire included 12 items to measure the subjective representation of the account components. Items had to be answered on 6-point rating scales ranging from 1 = "totally false" to 6 = "totally true."

*Admitting Fault—Subjectively (AFs)*

We used three items for measuring the subjective perception of Admitting Fault (e.g., "My friend admits being responsible for the loss of my bicycle"). The items were combined into a scale ($\alpha = .59$).

*Admitting Damage—Subjectively (ADs)*

We used three items for measuring the subjective perception of Admitting Damage (e.g., "My friend has clearly shown awareness of how much I have lost"). The items were combined into a scale ($\alpha = .49$).

*Expressing Remorse—Subjectively (ERs)*

The two items for measuring the subjective perception of Expressing Remorse had a correlation of .71 and were combined into a scale (e.g., "My friend feels bad and really regrets what has happened").

*Asking for Pardon—Subjectively (APs)*

The two items for measuring the subjective perception of Asking for Pardon ("I consider my friend's account a sincere apology" and "My friend would like

to be forgiven") did not correlate ($r = .01$). The first item was selected as a single item measure for this component because it shared less variance with the items for the remaining components than did the second item.

### Offering Compensation—Subjectively (OCs)

The two items for measuring the subjective perception of Offering Compensation had a correlation of .83, and we combined them into a scale (e.g., "My friend agreed to pay for the damage").

## Reactions to the Harm-Doer's Account

We measured five types of reactions to the harm-doer's account in the fourth part of the questionnaire. Of those five types of reactions, three were indicators of emotional reactions (positive mood and inner harmony, anger, and moral indignation), and two were cognitive judgments (the harm-doer's character and the appropriateness of the harm-doer's behavior). Table 1 presents the wording of all items.

### Positive Mood and Inner Harmony

We measured positive mood and inner harmony with 10 items. The 4-point rating scales ranged from 1 = "not at all" to 4 = "very much."

### State Anger

We measured state anger with the German STAXI State Anger Scale (Schwenkmezger et al., 1992).

### Moral Indignation

We constructed a scale for moral indignation. It contains 16 items expressing moral indignation overtly or covertly toward the harm-doer. Participants had to answer items on 6-point rating scales ranging from 1 = "no" to 6 = "certainly."

### Harm-Doer's Character

We asked participants to rate the harm-doer on 10 positive-trait and 10 negative-trait scales. The 6-point rating scales ranged from 1 = "totally false" to 6 = "totally true."

### Appropriateness of the Harm-Doer's Behavior

We constructed eight items for measuring how (in)appropriate and (dis)honest the harm-doer's behavior appeared to the participant subsequent to the incident. The 6-point rating scales ranged from 1 = "totally false" to 6 = "totally true."

**TABLE 1. Rotated Factor-Loading Matrix of Items Measuring Victim's Reactions to the Account**

| Item | Factor 1 | Factor 2 |
|------|----------|----------|
| *Positive mood and inner harmony* | | |
| 1. I feel agreeable.[a] | .23 | **−.64** |
| 2. I feel relaxed.[a] | .14 | **−.60** |
| 3. I feel benevolent.[a] | .21 | **−.40** |
| 4. I feel calm.[a] | .19 | **−.59** |
| 5. I feel unconcerned.[a] | .13 | **−.41** |
| 6. I feel gentle.[a] | .22 | **−.52** |
| 7. I feel harmonious.[a] | .16 | **−.55** |
| 8. I feel satisfied.[a] | .17 | **−.57** |
| 9. I feel peaceful.[a] | .16 | **−.56** |
| 10. I feel pleased.[ab] | .14 | −.32 |
| *STAXI State Anger Scale* | | |
| 1. I feel sulky. | −.13 | **.76** |
| 2. I feel so angry I could blow up. | −.18 | **.73** |
| 3. I feel disappointed. | −.31 | **.47** |
| 4. I feel bad-tempered. | −.16 | **.66** |
| 5. I feel upset. | −.08 | **.77** |
| 6. I feel indignant. | −.05 | **.75** |
| 7. I feel furious. | −.18 | **.81** |
| 8. I feel irate. | −.14 | **.75** |
| 9. I feel angry. | −.11 | **.78** |
| 10. I could curse aloud. | −.13 | **.70** |
| *Moral indignation: "I would …"* | | |
| 1. make cynical remarks.[b] | −.12 | .14 |
| 2. consider retaliation.[b] | −.18 | .32 |
| 3. reproach my friend with what she did. | −.32 | **.56** |
| 4. feel angry about her at times. | −.22 | **.64** |
| 5. retaliate against my friend. | −.24 | **.65** |
| 6. never lend her anything again. | −.23 | **.44** |
| 7. request compensation.[b] | −.11 | .20 |
| 8. have nasty thoughts about my friend. | −.28 | **.65** |
| 9. ridicule my friend in the presence of others.[b] | −.02 | .10 |
| 10. behave more aloof toward her. | −.38 | **.49** |
| 11. somehow make her feel my frustration. | −.33 | **.57** |
| 12. reduce contact for a certain time. | −.33 | **.48** |

*(table continues)*

**TABLE 1. Continued**

| Item | Factor 1 | Factor 2 |
|------|----------|----------|
| *Moral indignation: "I would..." (continued)* | | |
| 13. tease my friend at times.[b] | −.11 | .11 |
| 14. forgive her for what has happened.[a] | .27 | **−.58** |
| 15. advise others not to lend her anything.[b] | −.15 | .04 |
| 16. wish her a similar experience.[b] | −.19 | .33 |
| *Harm-doer's character* | | |
| 1. likeable | **.67** | −.20 |
| 2. disrespectful[a] | **−.55** | .29 |
| 3. loyal | **.63** | −.22 |
| 4. self-centered[a] | **−.49** | .21 |
| 5. mature | **.61** | −.19 |
| 6. uninterested[a] | **−.61** | .21 |
| 7. agreeable | **.68** | −.19 |
| 8. superficial[a] | **−.60** | .18 |
| 9. decent | **.72** | −.23 |
| 10. unscrupulous[a] | **−.63** | .27 |
| 11. friendly | **.68** | −.18 |
| 12. clumsy[ab] | −.30 | .04 |
| 13. attentive | **.47** | −.25 |
| 14. characterless[a] | **−.61** | .22 |
| 15. nice | **.66** | −.22 |
| 16. selfish[a] | **−.55** | .25 |
| 17. fair | **.73** | −.25 |
| 18. happy-go-lucky[ab] | −.38 | .18 |
| 19. cordial | **.66** | −.14 |
| 20. mean[a] | **−.55** | .28 |
| *Appropriateness of harm-doer's behavior* | | |
| 1. My friend has correctly apologized. | **.75** | −.20 |
| 2. She talked a lot without really apologizing.[a] | **−.74** | .15 |
| 3. Her words were an honest plea for pardon. | **.77** | −.18 |
| 4. She did not apologize with a single word.[a] | **−.63** | .15 |
| 5. Essentially, her excuse was adequate. | **.73** | −.16 |
| 6. I was irritated by what she said.[a] | **−.70** | .17 |
| 7. I consider her words an honest apology. | **.75** | −.19 |
| 8. I consider her words a mere pretext.[a] | **−.71** | .23 |

*Note.* We used principal axes factoring with varimax rotation. Boldface values indicate that the items were aggregated into the scales.
[a]Item scores were inverted before being aggregated. [b]Items were dropped because of low factor loadings (< .40).

## RESULTS

### Factor Analysis of the Reactions to the Harm-Doer's Account

To explore overlap in the participant's reactions to the harm-doer's account, we submitted all items of the reaction scales (positive mood and inner harmony, state anger, moral indignation, harm-doer's character, appropriateness of the harm-doer's behavior) to a principal axes analysis. The scree test suggested two common factors. They account for 41% of the variance of the 64 items. Varimax rotation improved the simple structure of the factor-loading matrix. Table 1 presents the factor loadings of this solution.

The items of the Character Evaluation Scale and the items of the Appropriateness of the Harm-Doer's Behavior Scale loaded highly on Factor 1. The items of the positive mood scale, the inner harmony scale, the state-anger scale, and the moral indignation scale loaded highly on Factor 2. Secondary loadings were generally low. We interpreted Factor 1 as a *character attribution factor* and Factor 2 as an *emotional reaction factor*.

To obtain homogeneous and reliable scales for these two factors, we dropped items with factor loadings below .40. The remaining 26 character attribution items had a Cronbach's alpha of .96. The remaining 28 emotional reaction items had a Cronbach's alpha of .95. High values on the character attribution scale represent a favorable evaluation of the harm-doer, whereas high values on the emotional reaction scale reflect a negative response to the harm-doer's account.

### Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

Table 2 provides the means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of the measured variables.

### Regression Analyses

*Effects of Objective Account Components on Subjective Account Components*

In the first series of analyses, we regressed each subjective account component on all objective account components (experimental factors). Experimental factors were contrast-coded so that a value of −1 reflected the absence of a specific component in an account, whereas a value of +1 reflected its presence. We calculated interaction terms by multiplying contrasts. Positive beta weights for these products indicate that the combination of the two components that are involved has an effect on the dependent variable over and above the sum of their main effects. In other words, the presence of one component amplifies the effect of the other. Accordingly, a negative beta for a product of contrasts indicates that the presence of one component that is involved in the product diminishes the effect of the other component.

**TABLE 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among the Measured Variables**

| Variable | M | SD | Correlations | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 1. Irreconcilability | 3.50 | 0.91 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Interpersonal trust | 2.27 | 0.60 | -.18** | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Trait-anger | 2.10 | 0.46 | .20** | -.16** | | | | | | | |
| 4. Admitting fault (AFs) | 4.30 | 1.10 | -.02 | .11* | -.15** | | | | | | |
| 5. Admitting damage (ADs) | 3.65 | 1.01 | -.04 | .14** | -.11* | .70** | | | | | |
| 6. Expressing remorse (ERs) | 4.02 | 1.10 | -.03 | .15** | -.09* | .71** | .70** | | | | |
| 7. Asking for pardon (APs) | 4.09 | 1.17 | -.05 | .07 | .02 | .46** | .47** | .53** | | | |
| 8. Offering compensation (OCs) | 3.78 | 1.36 | -.01 | .08 | -.15** | .54** | .46** | .47** | .34** | | |
| 9. Emotional reaction | 4.05 | 0.94 | .31** | -.17** | .39** | -.31** | -.33** | -.26*** | -.15** | -.31** | |
| 10. Character attribution | 3.70 | 0.90 | -.15** | .17** | -.20** | .70** | .69** | .69** | .41** | .50** | -.53** |

*Note.* Response scales ranged from 1 to 6. $N = 480$.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Table 3 contains all significant ($p < .05$) regression effects of the objective components on each of the five subjective components. Except for the perception of Expressing Remorse (ERs), the strongest regression effect on a subjective component always came from its objective equivalent. Nevertheless, the correspondence between objective and subjective components was not as high or as clear-cut as it would be if perception were accurate. For example, the subjective perception that the harm-doer admitted her fault (AFs) was highest in the Admitting Fault condition, but it was also elevated in the Offering Compensation condition, the Asking for Pardon condition, and the Admitting Fault and Offering Compensation condition (interaction).

We obtained the clearest correspondence between an objectively provided account component and its subjective perception for Offering Compensation: The perception that the subject had offered compensation to the victim (OCs) was strongest in the Offering Compensation condition (OCo). But it was also slightly

**TABLE 3. Effects of Objective Account Components on Subjective Account Components**

| Subjective component | Objective component | β | $t$ [a] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Admitting fault (AFs) | Admitting fault (AFo) | .31 | 7.41 |
| ($R^2 = .19$) | Asking for pardon (APo) | .15 | 3.57 |
| | Offering compensation (OCo) | .24 | 5.80 |
| | Interaction AFo × OCo | −.14 | −3.27 |
| Admitting damage (ADs) | Admitting fault (AFo) | .17 | 4.04 |
| ($R^2 = .14$) | Admitting damage (ADo) | .20 | 4.78 |
| | Expressing remorse (ERo) | .13 | 2.97 |
| | Asking for pardon (APo) | .09 | 2.13 |
| | Offering compensation (OCo) | .19 | 4.38 |
| | Interaction AFo × ADo × APo | −.10 | −2.24 |
| Expressing remorse (ERs) | Admitting fault (AFo) | .16 | 3.68 |
| ($R^2 = .08$) | Admitting damage (ADo) | .11 | 2.39 |
| | Asking for pardon (APo) | .11 | 2.48 |
| | Offering compensation (OCo) | .12 | 2.74 |
| | Interaction AFo × ADo × APo | −.11 | −2.48 |
| Asking for pardon (APs) | Admitting fault (AFo) | .12 | 2.68 |
| ($R^2 = .06$) | Asking for pardon (APo) | .16 | 3.56 |
| | Offering compensation (OCo) | .13 | 2.84 |
| Offering compensation (OCs) | Admitting fault (AFo) | .13 | 3.84 |
| ($R^2 = .46$) | Offering compensation (OCo) | .66 | 19.50 |
| | Interaction AFo × OCo | −.08 | −2.37 |

[a]$df = 473–476$.

elevated, compared to the control condition, in the Admitting Fault condition and in the Admitting Fault and Offering Compensation condition (interaction).

We obtained the lowest correspondence between the objective presence and the subjective perception of an account component for Expressing Remorse (ERo). Participants' perception of the harm-doer's intent to express her remorse (ERs) was not significantly altered by whether or not her account (ERo) contained an expression of remorse objectively. As a matter of fact, this perception was much more influenced by the other four objective components.

Viewing our results from the perspective of the objective components, Admitting Fault and Offering Compensation seem to imply all other components, even if the account did not contain them explicitly. The lowest impact of any objective component was obtained for Expressing Remorse: ERo had no significant effect on its subjective equivalent (ERs) and triggered only slightly the perception that the harm-doer admitted damage.

*Effects of Objective and Subjective Account Components on Reactions to the Account*

We assumed that subjective account components would have direct effects on victims' reactions, whereas objective components would affect these reactions only indirectly. We tested this assumption by regressing the dependent variables on both the subjective account components and the objective account components as well as on the interactions among the components. Including the objective components is necessary for testing whether or not their effects on the dependent variables are mediated by the subjective components. Full mediation would imply that objective components have no unique effects (Baron & Kenny, 1986). By contrast, unique effects of objective components would suggest that they affect reactions even if the victim had not been consciously aware of the component.

For reasons of efficient parameter estimation and easy parameter interpretation, we contrast-coded (+1/–1) objective accounts and $z$-transformed continuous variables (subjective account components and dependent variables). Table 4 contains all significant beta weights that were obtained.

The regression weights in Table 4 display two general trends. First, account components predicted character attribution much better than did emotional reaction. Second, all effects of subjective account components are larger than the effects of objective components.

*Emotional reactions.* A closer inspection of Table 4 reveals that emotional reaction was uniquely affected by objective account components only when they appeared in a specific combination. No objective account component had a unique main effect. Only the four-way interaction among Admitting Damage, Expressing Remorse, Asking for Pardon, and Offering Compensation was significant. However, the effect of this interaction is small. In fact, it is considerably smaller
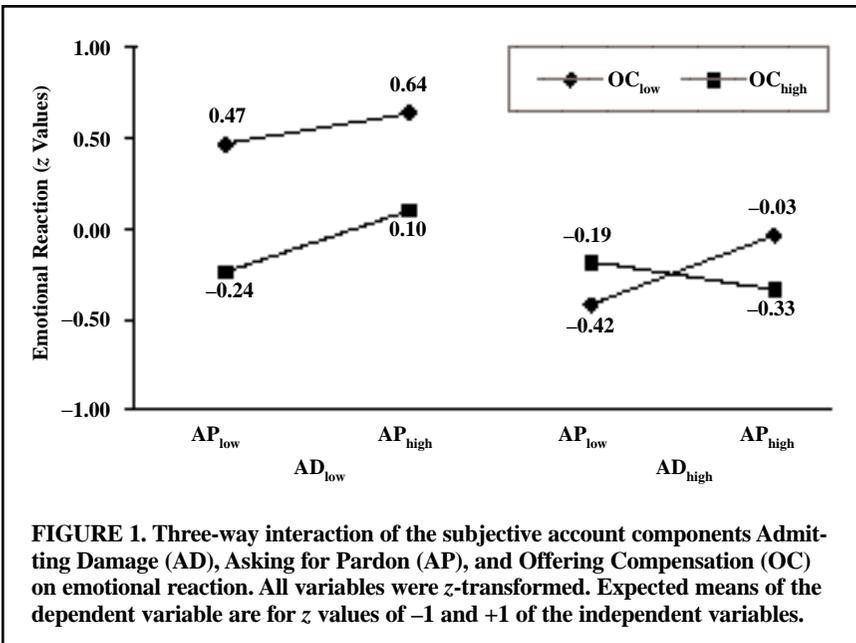
**TABLE 4. Effects of Objective and Subjective Account Components on Emotional Reaction and Character Attribution**

| Dependent variable | Independent variable | | β | $t$ [a] |
| | Kind of variable | Term | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Emotional reaction | Objective | $ADo \times ERo \times APo \times OCo$ | .08 | 1.93 |
| ($R^2 = .19$) | Subjective | ADs | −.25 | −4.54 |
| | | OCs | −.20 | −2.97 |
| | | $ADs \times APs \times OCs$ | −.08 | −2.57 |
| Character attribution | Objective | $AFo \times ERo \times OCo$ | −.06 | −2.19 |
| ($R^2 = .62$) | | $AFo \times ERo \times APo$ | .06 | 2.10 |
| | | $AFo \times APo \times OCo$ | −.06 | −2.08 |
| | Subjective | AFs | .30 | 6.03 |
| | | ADs | .27 | 5.81 |
| | | ERs | .25 | 5.54 |
| | | OCs | .11 | 2.35 |
| | | $AFs \times OCs$ | .06 | 2.21 |

[a]$df = 471–475.$

than the effects of the subjective components. Furthermore, the mean pattern that the interaction implied did not allow for a straightforward interpretation. For these reasons, we consider a replication necessary before interpreting this effect.

Out of the subjective components, only Admitting Damage (ADs) and Offering Compensation (OCs) had significant main effects. Whenever victims felt that the harm-doer had admitted causing damage, their emotional reaction was less negative than otherwise. The same was true if victims recognized that the harm-doer had offered them compensation for the lost bicycle. In addition, these two components were involved in a significant third-order interaction with Asking for Pardon (ADs × APs × OCs). Figure 1 displays this interaction. The figure contains standardized conditional means ($z$ values) of the dependent variable given $z$ values of −1 and +1 of the independent variables. The pattern suggests that when participants feel that the harm-doer has not admitted fault explicitly (see left side of Figure 1), there are two clear simple main effects: The less participants perceive that compensation was offered, the higher is their negative affect. Likewise, the more participants perceive that the harm-doer explicitly apologized, the higher is their negative affect. Though this last pattern seems paradoxical at first, it may reflect the attribution of bad intentions to the harm-doer: Probably the victim perceives the harm-doer's asking him or her for pardon without admitting damage and, more importantly, without offering compensation as an attempt to get away with a misdeed cheaply. However, this reasoning does not sufficiently

FIGURE 1. Three-way interaction of the subjective account components Admitting Damage (AD), Asking for Pardon (AP), and Offering Compensation (OC) on emotional reaction. All variables were *z*-transformed. Expected means of the dependent variable are for *z* values of –1 and +1 of the independent variables.

indicate why negative emotion is even higher when an apology and an offer of compensation are recognized (0.10) than when no apology is recognized but only compensation (–0.24). Again, this pattern may reflect a boomerang effect that is due to an exaggerated account that appears overstated on behalf of the victim (see preceding text).

The right part of Figure 1 applies to victims who perceived the harm-doer as admitting damage: As a general difference, negative affect is less intense under this condition (main effect of ADs). Negative affect is lowest when the victim perceives neither an apology nor an offer of compensation (–0.42) and second lowest when the victim perceives compensation but no apology (–0.33).

Negative affect is near the mean of zero when the victim perceives an apology but no compensation offer (–0.03). Again, it seems paradoxical that asking for pardon leads to an increase in negative affect. This conditional effect is only reversed if the victim feels that the harm-doer, in addition to giving her apology, acknowledges the damage that he or she caused and offers compensation for it. This finding too corroborates our suggestion that asking for pardon might appear as dishonest if it is not underpinned by an acknowledgment of the damage and an offer of compensation.

*Character attribution.* We found three interactions among objective accounts to affect character attribution significantly (see lower part of Table 4). We refrain from interpreting these interactions for three reasons: First, these interactions

were not significant when we regressed character attribution on objective variables alone. Second, betas were rather small. Third, the mean patterns implied by these interactions could not be meaningfully interpreted. Unless these interactions can be replicated, they should not be considered as systematic patterns.

Turning to subjective components as predictors of character attribution, we found that the victim evaluated the harm-doer more favorably when the victim perceived that the harm-doer had admitted her fault (AFs), admitted the damage (ADs), expressed remorse (ERs), and offered compensation (OCs). In addition to these main effects, the interaction of Admitting Fault × Offering Compensation (AFs × OCs) was significant. The positive sign of the product term in Table 2 reflects a synergistic interaction: The more the victim recognized one of the two components involved in the interaction as part of the account, the stronger the other component affected character attribution to the harm-doer in a positive direction.

### Effects of Personality Traits

We tested effects of the personality traits on emotional reaction and character attribution by entering the personality measures as additional predictors into the regression models that Table 4 presents. A first and important result of these analyses was that the regression effects of the objective and subjective account components were altered at most trivially; that is, personality variables did not change the beta weights of significant main and interaction effects when entered as additional predictors. Nevertheless, Trait Anger and Irreconcilability yielded unique effects on the dependent variables. More specifically, Trait Anger attenuated positive judgments of the harm-doer's character ($\beta = -.07$) and strongly augmented participants' negative emotional reaction ($\beta = .28$). Likewise, Irreconcilability attenuated a positive character attribution ($\beta = -.13$) and augmented a negative emotional reaction ($\beta = .24$). Interpersonal Trust had no effect on the dependent variables.

Also, Trait Anger and Interpersonal Trust affected subjective account components when we included them as predictors along with objective components. More specifically, Trait Anger attenuated participants' perceptions that the harm-doer had admitted fault ($\beta = -.14$) and that she had offered compensation for the damage ($\beta = -.13$). Further, Interpersonal Trust amplified participants' perceptions that the harm-doer had admitted damage ($\beta = .11$), expressed remorse ($\beta = .11$), and offered compensation ($\beta = .07$). No other effects were significant. Despite these direct effects of personality traits on subjective components, their inclusion in the regression analyses changed only trivially the effects of the objective account components. This pattern suggests that the personality traits that we considered did not operate as mediators of the objective account components. Rather, the effects of both groups of variables on subjective account components were independent from each other.

## DISCUSSION

The present study extends previous research in exploring the effects of harm-doers' verbal accounts on reactions of victims. Previous researchers have investigated only the main effects of account components; in the present study, we also investigated interactions among them. This new area of investigation seemed necessary because certain combinations of account components may be more effective than others in satisfying a victim and restoring interactional justice. Our study extends previous research in a second regard: Previous studies did not investigate the effects of objectively given account components and their subjective perception separately. In the present study, we considered objective and subjective account components simultaneously. Separating the effects of objective and subjective account components seemed important in light of the possibility that perceptions of accounts may be inaccurate because of account schemas.

Therefore, a first specific goal of our study was to explore how well individuals are capable of distinguishing different account components and how accurately they perceive whether or not a harm-doer included a specific account component in an account. A second specific goal of our study was to test the assumption that the reactions of victims to accounts would not depend directly —but only indirectly—on objective account components. We assumed that the effects of objective account components would be mediated by the victims' subjective perception of them and that only subjective account components would have direct effects. Our third specific goal was to explore whether the personality traits of Irreconcilability, Interpersonal Trust, and Trait Anger, which can be linked theoretically to reactions of victims to accounts, indeed affect these reactions over and above objective and subjective account components. Furthermore, we wanted to explore whether the personality traits that we considered affect victims' reactions directly or indirectly via subjective perceptions of account components.

Regarding our first research goal, which concerned the relation between objective and subjective account components, we indeed found that subjective perceptions and representations of objective account components are not accurate. Only the subjective perception of an offer to compensate could be predicted well by the equivalent objective factor. For the remaining components, the consistency between objective and subjective accounts was much lower. Possibly, the rather precise perception of an offer to compensate is because compensations are concrete matters and can be conveyed more explicitly than other, more symbolic and implicit aspects of accounts. Although victims can detect an objectively given offer to compensate more precisely than other accounts, such an offer had an effect on all other subjective account components as well. This result suggests that an offer to compensate implies conceptually or psychologically that the harm-doer also admits fault, admits damage, expresses remorse, and asks for pardon, even if these factors were not objectively present. A similar pattern was

found for Admitting Fault, a component that seems to imply an admission of damage and an expression of remorse. The admission of fault seems to imply even Asking for Pardon and Offering Compensation, albeit less strongly. We obtained the lowest correspondence between an objective account and its subjective equivalent for Expressing Remorse: Apparently, a verbal statement of remorse is neither necessary nor very effective for making the victim feel that the harm-doer is remorseful. This result might be due to our cognitive schemas of apologies: Remorse appears to be implied by other verbal accounts. Therefore, researchers have to be cautious when investigating the effects of verbal statements of remorse via objective manipulation. To a lesser extent, this is also true for the remaining account components. An objective manipulation of account components does not guarantee that these components are perceived and interpreted accordingly. As a consequence, a small or zero effect of an objectively varied account component does not necessarily mean that this component is unimportant. In the same vein, a strong effect of an objectively manipulated account component may be due not only to this component but also to other components that were subjectively implied. Although investigators in psychology have long known the limited equivalence of objective signals and their subjective perception (cf. Brunswik, 1956), previous researchers on account episodes and their effects have not paid sufficient attention to this phenomenon.

Our second research goal was to test the assumption that objective account components would affect a victim's reaction only indirectly via subjective perceptions. In general, the present results confirmed this hypothesis. Unique effects of objectively manipulated account components—if obtained at all—were much weaker than were effects of subjective components. Furthermore, regression analyses revealed another interesting result: Character attribution could be predicted much better by account components than by negative emotion. This finding indicates that our participants considered the harm-doer's account as highly informative regarding her motives and character. They not only had clear opinions on how appropriate the harm-doer's behavior was; they also made straightforward inferences from the harm-doer's account to her character. By contrast, emotional reactions were much less closely linked to perceptions of the harm-doer's behavior. This result means either that participants had difficulties in imagining how they would feel in the described situation or that emotional reactions are affected less directly by a harm-doer's behavior than are evaluations of the behavior. Additional research is needed to clarify this issue.

A third research goal of our study was to investigate effects of Trait Anger, Irreconcilability, and Interpersonal Trust. It turned out that Trait Anger and Irreconcilability influenced emotional reaction directly and substantially. However, including these effects in regression equations did not alter the effects of account components. Personality differences also affected subjective accounts. Trait Anger attenuated participants' perceptions that the harm-doer had admitted fault and that she had offered compensation for the damage. Interpersonal Trust

enhanced participants' perceptions that the harm-doer admitted the damage, expressed remorse, and offered compensation. Interestingly, including the personality traits in the prediction of subjective accounts did not alter the effects of objective accounts. This finding means that personality traits and objectively given accounts have independent effects on the subjective construal of the situation. This finding suggests that the victims' perceptions of harm-doers and their accounts are social constructions that are partly shaped by personality variables that dispose the individual to perceive, interpret, and evaluate his or her social environment in a specific way. Under some conditions, these personality effects may be no less important for the emergence and resolution of a conflict than the words and deeds of a harm-doer.

The general goal of our study was to explore in more detail how effective account components and combinations of account components are in comforting victims and influencing their willingness to forgive their harm-doers. As it turned out, three out of five (subjective) account components were about equally important for attributing favorable character to the harm-doer: Admitting Fault, Admitting Damage, and Expressing Remorse. Asking for Pardon had no main effect on character attribution. Asking for Pardon also did not alter the victim's emotional reaction. This result is remarkable because Asking for Pardon is the only component that contains an explicit plea of the harm-doer to be forgiven by the victim. An explanation for this result can be derived from its interaction with Admitting Damage and Offering Compensation. According to this interaction, negative emotion is most likely when the victim feels that a harm-doer wants to be forgiven without naming the damage that he or she has caused and without offering compensation for it. Probably, victims interpret such a configuration as hypocrisy in that the victim may feel that the harm-doer wants to get away cheaply with a simple apology. It seems that sincere apologies must contain an admission of damage and an offer to pay for it. Given these two elements, it no longer seems necessary to ask for pardon explicitly.

Taken together, our study supplements previous research on account episodes in several ways: First, our results demonstrate that research designs relying only on the experimental manipulation of account components may lack internal validity. Certain account components may affect each other, which makes it difficult or even impossible to vary them independently on the level of subjective perceptions. This is a serious problem because we found, secondly, that subjective perceptions of account components have a stronger influence on emotional and cognitive reactions than do objectively manipulated components. A third conclusion from our results is that the subjective perception of account components does not depend solely on what was objectively done or said by the harm-doer and on general account schemas. In addition to these factors, the personality of victims shapes how they construe an account subjectively. Furthermore, personality variables have a direct influence on how a victim reacts to a harm-doer's account. Fourth, the interactions that we have identified suggest that the acceptance and

efficacy of accounts are not simply functions of the number of elements that they contain. Accordingly, account components cannot compensate for each other in the way of an additive model. Rather, victims perceive some patterns of account components as more sincere than others and, for this reason, infer a higher probability of forgivingness.

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