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# The Road to Reconciliation: Antecedents of Victim Willingness to Reconcile Following a Broken Promise

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*The antecedents of victim willingness to reconcile a professional relationship following an incident involving a broken promise were examined in terms of offender tactics (i.e., nature of apology, timeliness of reparative act, sincerity) and relationship characteristics (i.e., nature of past relationship, probability of future violation) using a within- and between-subjects policy-capturing design. Relatively speaking, relationship characteristics were as strongly related to willingness to reconcile as offender tactics. Furthermore, we found moderating effects of magnitude of violation on the willingness to reconcile a relationship following a trust violation. In particular, nature of past relationship was weighed more heavily, whereas probability of future violation was weighed less heavily when the magnitude of the violation was greater. Practical implications and recommendations for future research are discussed.*

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The presence of trust in professional relationships is important as it forms the basis for expectations surrounding future outcomes, allowing individuals to facilitate enhanced decision-making processes with reduced uncertainty (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Effective organizational functioning necessitates the presence of trust due to

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the impracticality of contracting all aspects of working relationships (Arrow, 1973; Parkhe, 1998). In addition, many business transactions occur within the context of arms-length relationships (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995; Shapiro, Sheppard & Cheraskin, 1992) and are conducted on the basis of promises made: giving someone “your word” and a handshake often seals the deal (Shapiro et al., 1992).

Yet, arms-length relationships may be especially susceptible to damage by trust violations, because trust at this level is often considered partial, tentative, and fragile (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). In fact, some scholars assert that once trust is broken, it can never be repaired (Rempel, Holmes & Zanna, 1985), and this may be particularly true in arms-length relationships that depend heavily on cognitive assessments of trustworthiness without the more emotional ties that bind more established relationships. Indeed, despite the prevalence of and benefits provided by trust in professional relationships, trust violations are common (AFL-CIO, 2001; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994) and are associated with lower organizational citizenship behaviors and job performance, and higher turnover intentions (Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). Redefined, strained, or terminated working relationships, and perhaps even retribution (Aquino, Tripp & Bies, 2001; Tripp & Bies, 1997) often accompany the reality of trust violations. To say the least, trust violations are likely to impair otherwise productive and effective working relationships.

The benefits of trust and the damage incurred by trust violations within professional relationships make it essential to understand the dynamics of reconciliation and rebuilding trust in the aftermath of a trust violation. The purpose of this paper is to identify several key variables that are associated with a victim’s willingness to reconcile in an arms-length, transactional exchange relationship when an explicit promise has been broken. We expect this study to contribute to the literature by providing empirical testing for theoretical work on trust repair by Lewicki and Bunker (1996). The extant literature on trust has been criticized on the grounds that it is long on theory and short on empirical research necessary for further theory building, extension, and refinement (Ross & LaCroix, 1996) and that there is a dearth of work (theoretical and empirical) on rebuilding broken trust (Ferrin, 2002). Another principal contribution of this study is that it is designed to assess the types of variables that are most associated with willingness to reconcile. A key research question that we seek to answer here is whether it is the post-violation tactics employed by the offender or the broader contextual features of the relationship itself that are the key drivers to initiating the reconciliation process.

To develop the foundation for our arguments, we will begin by discussing the meaning of trust and the effects of trust violations in the context of arms-length relationships. We then describe the distinction between reconciliation and rebuilding trust, and present a framework for examining reconciliation after a trust violation. Finally, we draw from Lewicki and Bunker’s (1996) theoretical work on repairing broken trust to develop hypotheses that specify a number of factors that may be vital to reconciliation.

## Trust and Trust Violations

In this study, we refer to trust as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another”

(Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998: 395). Theoretical work on trust has suggested that there are several bases of trust in professional relationships (Shapiro et al., 1992), and that these bases of trust represent stages that are hierarchical and sequential, such that as relationships develop, higher and more complex levels of trust are attained (Lewicki & Bunker, 1995). Trust at the most basic level is described as calculus-based trust (CBT; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995), and applies to arms-length exchanges in strictly professional relationships. Lewicki and Bunker defined CBT as “an ongoing, market-oriented, economic calculation whose value is determined by the outcomes resulting from creating and sustaining the relationship relative to the costs of severing it” (1995: 145). Accordingly, CBT represents a predominantly cognitive assessment of one’s trustworthiness that is transaction-focused, whereas higher levels of trust become more emotionally-grounded and relationship-focused.

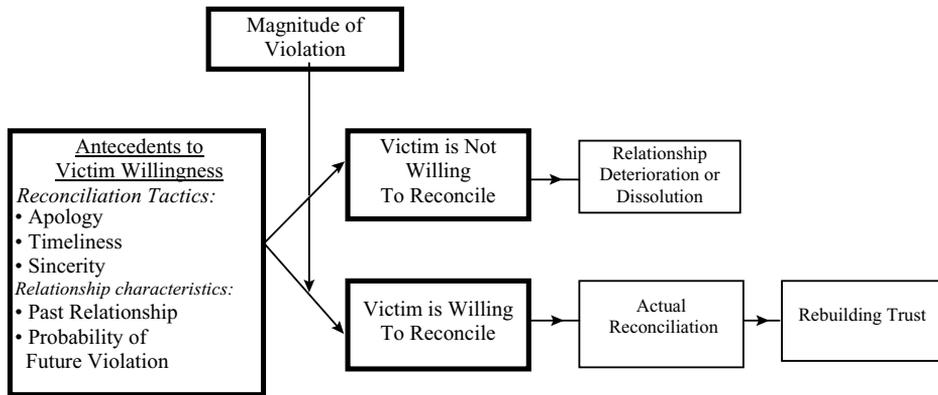
A trust violation occurs when evidence disconfirms the confident positive expectations regarding another’s conduct and redefines the nature of the relationship in the mind of the injured party. Lewicki and Bunker (1996) specified a model that portrays the dynamics of a trust violation from the victim’s perspective. This model shows that trust violations will result in both a cognitive appraisal, in which the victim determines the responsibility for and costs of the violation, and an emotional reaction, composed of some mixture of anger, hurt, and frustration.

Trust violations do more than inflict transaction losses on the victim; they question the very foundation of the relationship itself (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). These considerations suggest that relationships need to be reconciled before trust can be rebuilt (Fuller & Mayer, 2002; Tomlinson, Lewicki & Dineen, 2002).

### Reconciliation and Rebuilding Trust

There are two fundamental and sequential processes that we believe are essential to an understanding of trust repair in an injured relationship: *reconciliation* and *rebuilding trust*. Reconciliation is realized when both parties exert effort to assist in rebuilding a damaged relationship (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996), and it connotes a desire to settle issues that led to the disruption of the relationship (Freedman, 1998) so the relationship can be restored to vitality (Aquino et al., 2001; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Further, reconciliation may be viewed as a behavioral manifestation of forgiveness, defined as “a deliberate decision by the victim to relinquish anger, resentment, and the desire to punish a party held responsible for inflicting harm” (Aquino et al., 2001: 53), which allows the relationship to continue. However, it is possible to forgive someone (release him or her from responsibility for damage he/she has inflicted) without a willingness to reconcile the relationship or trust him or her again in the future (Enright, Gassin & Wu, 1992; Freedman, 1998).

Consider the example of a parts supplier and a manufacturing plant representative who have an informal agreement concerning the shipment date for parts. When the parts show up two days late, a violation of trust has occurred. The manufacturer (i.e., victim) must decide whether or not to reconcile the relationship, and/or demonstrate a desire to rebuild trust in the relationship. That is, the manufacturer can choose to move past her anger, yet still not be open to continuing the relationship. Or, the manufacturer can open the



Note. Bold boxes contain variables examined in the present study.

Figure 1. A model of relationship reconciliation and rebuilding trust.

door towards rebuilding trust by demonstrating a willingness to reconcile the relationship (e.g., by considering future deals with the supplier instead of taking the business elsewhere).

Relatively little attention has been devoted to the constructs of forgiveness and reconciliation in the management literature (Kurzynski, 1998). In one study, Bies and Tripp (1996) found that some individuals chose forgiveness when reacting to trust violations instead of choosing blame or retribution, and other researchers have explained the correlation between blame attributions, revenge and forgiveness cognitions, and reconciliation behaviors (Aquino et al., 2001; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). What is missing from this literature is an understanding of the role of key variables that are associated with a victim being willing to reconcile a relationship following a trust violation. In Figure 1 we present a conceptual model that illustrates how rebuilding trust might occur following a violation. The model emphasizes what we believe to be the key antecedents of victim willingness to reconcile a relationship after a trust violation. As shown in the model, following a trust violation, the relationship will not move forward, and in fact, may terminate entirely (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996), if the victim is not willing to reconcile the relationship. On the other hand, if the victim is willing to reconcile, the possibility of rebuilding trust in the relationship is enhanced. Accordingly, we believe that the victim's willingness to reconcile is the appropriate starting point for analyzing relationships where trust has been injured, and the offender desires to reconcile and rebuild trust.

Our review of Lewicki and Bunker's (1996) theoretical work on trust repair indicated two groups of variables that are likely to be antecedents to victim willingness to reconcile a professional relationship after a trust violation: offender reconciliation tactics and relationship characteristics. Reconciliation tactics are those behaviors over which an offender has relative control when engaging in reparative efforts. Alternatively, relationship characteristics form the broader context in which a trust violation has occurred, and thus are less readily controllable by the offender. We now describe these two groups of variables in greater detail.

## Reconciliation Tactics Used by Offenders

There are three dominant tactics that an offender can use in attempting to reconcile a relationship that has been damaged by a trust violation: the type of apology offered by the offender, the duration of time elapsed after the violation for the offender to take restorative action, and the sincerity of the restorative actions taken by the offender.

### *Type of Apology*

A formal apology is generally considered to be a prerequisite for reconciling a relationship following a violation of trust. An apology conveys an admission of responsibility and regret on the part of the offender for the violation and its concomitant harm on the victim, and may also convey a stated desire to reconcile and continue the relationship (Goffman, 1972; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Tedeschi & Norman, 1985). This is an important step in reducing distrust following a violation, because it communicates recognition of injustice to the injured person, along with a desire to restore justice (Greenberg, 1990). An apology can represent a powerful social account that helps the victim gain more information about the precise nature of the violation and the offender. For example, Greenberg describes an apology as an attempt “to convince an audience that although the actor accepts blame for the undesirable event, any attributions made on the basis of it would not be accurate” (1990: 133). Research has shown that apologies are invaluable in mitigating aggression from injured persons, and that more extensive apologies are necessary to resolve more serious violations (Ohbuchi, Kameda & Agarie, 1989; Sitkin & Bies, 1993).

In this study, we consider three types of apologies. The first attempts to placate the victim, without ever making an explicit apology. In other words, the offender is cognizant of the harm they have imposed on the victim, but his/her response only implicitly acknowledges the damage to the relationship (e.g., as when the offender acts especially kind towards the victim or provides special, nonsolicited favors, as if to implicitly compensate for the violation without ever explicitly apologizing). Such prosocial behaviors may be regarded by the offender as proof that they have mended a spoiled identity resulting from their transgression (Tedeschi & Norman, 1985), but in the absence of an explicit, verbal apology, this message may not have the same effect on the victim. We consider placating to be a “no-apology” condition in this paper, and posit that this option is the least effective in encouraging the victim to be willing to reconcile. We are not aware of any prior empirical research on this specific tactic.

The other two types of apologies we consider are explicit statements of remorse, and are accompanied by accounts that shape the victim’s impressions of the offender’s intent and motives (Goffman, 1972): one type makes an internal attribution of the cause of violation, whereas the other makes an external attribution. Internal attributions may be more effective in stimulating willingness to reconcile, because the offender is accepting greater personal responsibility for the violation instead of attempting to shift blame. Those who make excuses to reduce personal responsibility may seriously compromise their credibility and character in the eyes of others (Schlenker, Pontari & Christopher, 2001). Following this reasoning, apologies that blame external causes for the violation are expected to have deleterious effects on efforts to reconcile. However, when offenders apologize by making an internal

attribution, the victim should be more likely to feel that the violator is simply admitting a personal shortcoming, and hence the apology will have greater credibility.

On the other hand, it is possible that apologies with external attributions are *more* effective. It is a frequent occurrence in everyday life that offenders choose to “pass the buck” in order to shift culpability away from themselves. This may be true because admitting that one has committed a trust violation is an admission of flawed moral character, tantamount to untrustworthiness. Victims may construe such admissions as *prima facie* evidence that the offender is not worthy of trust in the future. Thus, social accounts may be constructed to manage the victim’s impressions of the violation (Greenberg, 1990) in a way that will minimize the offender’s apparent responsibility for harm and protect the offender’s desired social identity (Bies, 1987a). In fact, prior research has stressed the advantages of shifting culpability following transgressions. For example, Crant and Bateman (1993) found that use of external causal accounts lessened observations of blame for failure, which in turn predicted impressions of the actor.

We summarize these differing predictions with the following formal hypotheses, and note that Hypotheses 1b and 1c are competing hypotheses.

*Hypothesis 1a:* Offering no apology will be less effective than offering either an apology with an external attribution or an apology with an internal attribution in influencing the victim’s willingness to reconcile the relationship.

*Hypothesis 1b:* An apology with an internal attribution will be more effective than an apology with an external attribution in influencing the victim’s willingness to reconcile the relationship.

*Hypothesis 1c:* An apology with an external attribution will be more effective than an apology with an internal attribution in influencing the victim’s willingness to reconcile the relationship.

### *Timeliness of Restorative Action*

Lewicki and Bunker (1996) also imply that the timeliness of an offender’s restorative effort is an important consideration. When a violation of trust has taken place, the victim has accepted and relied on a promise that was not fulfilled. We predict that restorative action will most likely be effective if it is taken soon after the violation because this action immediately signals to the victim that the offender is cognizant of the violation, savvy in detecting verbal and nonverbal cues from the victim expressing distress at the violation, and concerned enough about the relationship to quickly make amends (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Further, when individuals must make sense of ambiguous situations where no explanations have been offered, they often rely on contextual cues or prior information (Griffin & Ross, 1991). In the absence of an explanation by the perpetrator, the victim is left to unilaterally provide a subjective interpretation for the violation. Over time, individuals engage in cognitive sense making according to these interpretations (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Quick restorative action by the offender can ward off such subjective interpretations, replacing them with explanations that may mitigate adverse reactions.

*Hypothesis 2:* When restorative action is taken soon after a violation of trust, the victim will be more willing to reconcile the relationship.

### *Sincerity*

Lewicki and Bunker (1996) also indicate that the sincerity of the restorative action is likely to have a critical impact on the victim's willingness to reconcile the relationship (cf. Bies, 1987a; Ohbuchi et al., 1989). Sincere apologies or explanations convey honest regret for the harm inflicted on the victim. This relates to sensitivity of treatment, a key component of organizational justice (Bies, 1987b). In a study of victim reactions to deceit, Shapiro (1991) found that the perceived honesty of explanations by the offender was a key variable that influenced the extent of negative reactions by the victim. However, expressed sincerity may not be sufficient; it is the victim's *perception* of sincerity that counts.

*Hypothesis 3:* The perceived sincerity of the restorative action will be positively associated with greater willingness to reconcile the relationship.

### *Interaction Between Type of Apology and Sincerity*

It is further expected that perceived sincerity will enhance the effects of an apology (with either an internal or external attribution) such that the positive slope representing the relationship between apology and willingness to reconcile becomes steeper when the apology is perceived to be more sincere (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Research indicates that confessions that express remorse have the greatest impact on forgiveness (Gold & Weiner, 2000). Hence, we propose that when the offender attempts restorative action with the victim, a sincere apology will be much more effective than a neutral apology (or no apology) in influencing victim willingness to reconcile.

Similar reasoning would suggest that the type of the apology given (an external vs. internal attribution) will interact with the perceived sincerity of the apology. When apologies are perceived as being low in sincerity, we expect the predicted differences in willingness to reconcile among internal and external attribution conditions (as outlined above). But to the extent that an apology is perceived to be high in sincerity, an honest account for the transgression, and a genuine effort at reconciliation, the type of attribution (internal or external) will not matter (Shapiro, 1991). Stated another way, there may be main effects favoring one type of apology over the other (Hypotheses 1b and 1c), but as the perceived sincerity of the apology increases, this effect should disappear, regardless of the type of attribution.

*Hypothesis 4a:* There will be an apology by sincerity interaction such that sincerity magnifies the positive effect of apologies (compared to no apology) on willingness to reconcile the relationship.

*Hypothesis 4b:* There will be an attribution by sincerity interaction such that the effect of internal and external attributions on apologies will differ in their effect on the willingness to reconcile the relationship only when they are perceived to be insincere.

### Relationship Characteristics

In addition to the tactics used by the violator following a violation of trust, two relationship characteristics are posited to be related to the likelihood of reconciliation: the nature of the past relationship, and the probability of future violation.

#### *Nature of Past Relationship*

Lewicki and Bunker discuss the nature of the past relationship as an important consideration for the victim contemplating reconciliation:

If there have been instances of other trust-destroying actions in recent times, the event in question may be the “straw that broke the camel’s back.” Thus, either a very severe trust-destroying event or a series of trust-destroying events may be sufficient to render a judgment that trust is “unrepairable.” Alternatively, the victim may believe that the relationship is not “worth” saving—that is, the benefits and gains that were derived from the relationship are not worth recapturing and restoring. (1996: 133)

Researchers have been puzzled by divergent reactions to violations of trust, with some people choosing to reconcile with the violator while others do not. Kramer’s (1996) review of the literature on trust portrays individuals as intuitive auditors, constantly reviewing past transactions in search of evidence that justifies future decisions to trust. Prior trust speaks to the history of the relationship and evaluates actions within the broader context of the relationship as a whole. If the violator has a good relationship history with the victim, any deviation is more likely to be seen as the exception rather than the rule. Additionally, researchers have suggested that the historical context of a relationship helps to predict future reconciliation (Cords & Aureli, 2000).

*Hypothesis 5:* A good past relationship is associated with a greater willingness to reconcile the relationship.

#### *Probability of Future Violation*

Because the victim suffered harm by relying on a promise that was subsequently broken, she will be motivated to avoid future risk, perhaps to the point of hypervigilance (Kramer, 1996; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995, 1996). Consequently, the victim will search for cues that predict whether future violations are probable before making a commitment to reconcile the relationship.

*Hypothesis 6:* To the extent that the victim feels the violation was an isolated event, there will be a greater willingness to reconcile the relationship.

### Magnitude of Violation as a Moderating Influence

Finally, we contend that the efficacy of reconciliation tactics and relationship characteristics in enhancing victim willingness to reconcile a relationship will be moderated

by the magnitude of the violation (Figure 1). The magnitude of the violation is defined as the degree to which “the violation shakes the very foundation of the relationship or creates very serious consequences” (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996: 136). Research indicates that reparative efforts must be more extensive following more serious violations (Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Schlenker & Darby, 1981). Thus, even though apologies that are timely and sincere will have a main effect on willingness to reconcile, this effect will be attenuated as the magnitude of violation increases. Likewise, even relationships with a good past history and low probability for a future breach can have significantly lower beneficial effects on willingness to reconcile if the magnitude of violation is high. Thus, whereas researchers have proposed that more severe perceptions of violation lead to less willingness to reconcile (Pugh & Skarlicki, 2000), this effect likely occurs because reparative efforts that would suffice for small violations are not adequate for large ones.

*Hypotheses 7a–e:* The magnitude of violation will interact with (a) apologies, (b) timeliness, (c) sincerity, (d) past relationship, and (e) probability of future violation in influencing victim willingness to reconcile, such that the positive effects of these reconciliation tactics and relationship characteristics decrease as the magnitude of violation increases.

Although we do not state a formal hypothesis, we were also interested to see which group of factors (reconciliation tactics or relationship characteristics) carried more weight in determining willingness to reconcile a relationship. The existing literature does not give clear prescriptions to those seeking to reconcile a professional, arms-length relationship. More specifically, we examine whether the reconciliation tactics used by offenders or the relationship context is more powerful in accounting for willingness to reconcile following broken trust.

## Method

### *Sample and Design*

Surveys were distributed to 90 graduate business students in a negotiation course at a large midwestern university. Participation was optional; however, participants were paid 10 dollars to complete the survey. Forty-five usable surveys were returned for a response rate of 50%. One survey was deemed to be unusable after open-ended comments and response patterns indicated that the subject did not follow instructions. Six surveys had missing data that were replaced using the mean replacement method (Roth, 1994). Specifically, the mean response to the scenario in question across other participants in the same condition was used as the mean value. We used a policy-capturing design to investigate our hypotheses, and our sample size is respectable in comparison to many other published studies using such a design. For example, Brannick and Brannick (1989) used a sample consisting of 13 supervisors and 10 faculty members, and Hobson, Mendel and Gibson (1981) used a sample of 20 faculty members. Such small sample sizes in policy-capturing studies are not uncommon because the focal issue is usually the individual analysis for

each subject. Thus, the effective sample size for within-subjects analyses depends on the number of judgments made by each subject; in this study, subjects evaluated 48 scenarios. (Compare this to 39 profiles evaluated by subjects in [Dunn, Mount, Barrick & Ones, 1995](#) and 50 profiles evaluated in [Orr, Sackett & Mercer, 1989](#).) Moreover, in this study, we were primarily interested in the between-subjects analysis. Because each of the 45 subjects evaluated 48 scenarios, our effective sample size is 2160 ([Judge & Bretz, 1992](#)).

Respondent's ages ranged from 23 to 46, with a mean age of 30. Fifty-six percent of respondents were male. The scenarios we used in this study depicted a deal negotiated within the context of a strictly professional business relationship. To ensure that subjects could respond intelligently to the business scenarios created for this study, we collected measures of previous negotiation experience and work experience. Rated on a 7-point scale (1: not at all experienced, 7: very experienced), mean previous negotiation experience was 3.73. The average amount of work experience was over 6 years, and approximately 50% of the sample was working full time while enrolled in an evening MBA program. Taken together, this suggests that the sample had sufficient work experience, and was sophisticated enough to respond intelligently to the policy-capturing scenarios we presented in the study.

Policy-capturing methodology has been used in numerous research areas including job choice ([Cable & Judge, 1994](#); [Judge & Bretz, 1992](#)), disciplinary decisions ([Klaas & Dell'Omo, 1991](#)), and absenteeism ([Martocchio & Judge, 1994](#)) among others. Policy-capturing methodology allows for an indirect assessment of the information processing strategies of decision makers ([Aiman-Smith, Scullen & Barr, 2000](#)). It asks decision makers to judge a series of scenarios that combine various levels of independent variables; subsequent analyses regress their responses across these variables. One of the primary advantages of policy capturing is that it overcomes problems stemming from social desirability bias ([Graham & Cable, 2001](#)). Specifically, through indirect assessment of the relative importance of explanatory variables (as opposed to asking respondents to simply rank the variables in order of importance), it allows for a more internally valid measurement. Additionally, asking individuals to judge scenarios rather than single variables is more similar to actual real life decision-making, and hence more externally valid ([Rynes, Schwab & Heneman, 1983](#)). Also, policy-capturing allows for analysis at the individual level, enabling researchers to gauge differences among respondents and to predict overall trends ([Karren & Barringer, 2000](#)). Finally, the level of experimental control in policy-capturing designs allows for causal inferences about the effects of hypothesized factors on dependent variables ([Cable & Judge, 1994](#)).

We contend that policy-capturing is an appropriate tool for testing the hypotheses in this study for the reasons listed above, despite its assumption that individuals act as rational decision makers. Although the context of a trust violation may contain emotional aspects that may cloud rational judgment, we are specifically investigating trust violations and reconciliation in the context of a CBT relationship ([Lewicki & Bunker, 1996](#)). We also note that the bulk of empirical research on trust has been conducted under a game theoretic paradigm, which makes similar assumptions regarding rational actors and their information-processing capabilities but may limit the variety of response alternatives available to the violator and victim (see [Kramer, 1996](#) for a brief review).

A mixed experimental design was used to test both within- and between-subjects effects. The design included five within-subjects variables: nature of apology (no apology, apology with external attribution, apology with internal attribution), timeliness of restorative act (immediate or delayed), perceived sincerity (sincere or insincere), nature of the prior relationship (good or poor), and probability of future violation (likely or not likely to happen again).

The between-subjects factor was magnitude of the violation (high or low). We decided against simply including level of violation as an additional within-subjects variable for three reasons. First, doing so would have raised the number of scenarios each respondent answered in a completely crossed design to 96, well above commonly recommended levels of scenario maxima (e.g., Cooksey, 1996 recommends a range of between 40 and 80 scenarios whereas Rossi & Anderson, 1982 recommend a maximum of 60). Expanding the maximum would have likely introduced fatigue and stress effects that may have biased the results (Graham & Cable, 2001; Webster & Trevino, 1995). Second, although researchers have advocated the use of fractional factorial (Cochran & Cox, 1957; Klaas & Dell’Omo, 1991) and incomplete block (Graham & Cable, 2001) designs to overcome problems associated with a large number of scenarios, these design types disallow clean estimation of individual policy decisions as well as certain higher-order interactions, both of which are examined in the present study (Karren & Barringer, 2000).

Third, we presented background information to each participant that described a negotiation situation between two small business owners. In this background information, a violation in a negotiated agreement was described, along with supporting financial loss figures suggesting a high or low magnitude of violation (see Appendix A). The background information was applicable across scenarios. Thus, if the violation condition were to be crossed with the other independent variables, we would have had to present two fundamentally different background situations to the respondents with different financial figures for each *before* the subjects proceeded to evaluate each scenario, potentially causing confusion. Therefore, we deemed splitting the sample among the high and low violation conditions (with the same scenarios subsequently presented to each respondent) to be the best approach.

Completely crossing the within-subjects variables in both the high and low violation conditions yielded 48 scenarios that allowed for a direct assessment of the relative importance of the five variables for each decision maker. The surveys, though linked to different background information (i.e., high or low violation), contained the exact same 48 scenarios. Since they were crossed, the independent variables were orthogonal. The between-subjects portion of the analysis consisted of analyzing the interactive effects of magnitude of violation on the five within-subjects variables.

Care was taken to individually evaluate each of the 48 scenarios *a priori* to ensure realistic variable combinations (Karren & Barringer, 2000). Specifically, all three authors independently evaluated the scenarios. Where there was disagreement about scenario clarity, scenarios were revised in such a way as to maintain realism without detracting from the meaning of the variable until agreement was reached (e.g., using “however” or “although” as transitions between linguistically awkward variable combinations). The clarity of the scenarios was also verified in a pilot test (described below). Additionally, a gender-neutral name was used for the offender. The following is an example of a scenario with variable

names represented in brackets:

You and Pat have had a good business relationship in the past [past relationship]. After Pat told you about the reduced order, Pat did not seem to be in much of a hurry to explain the adjustment [timeliness]. When Pat apologized, Pat said it was not controllable and was due to business dropping off [apology with external attribution]. It appeared that this apology was sincere [perceived sincerity]. After thinking about Pat's behavior, you decided that this is probably an isolated event [probability of future violation].

The order of scenario presentation was randomized to prevent order and fatigue effects (Judge & Bretz, 1992). Although the number of scenarios fell within recommended levels, researchers have suggested pre-testing surveys to ensure subjects can reasonably process the scenarios (Karren & Barringer, 2000). Accordingly, we pilot tested the complete survey on a sample of four graduate business students who were blind to the purpose of the study. All indicated that the survey took about 45 min to complete, was manageable, and fatigue was not a concern. Additionally, their comments led to minor changes in wording to enhance realism prior to distributing the survey to the study population.

### Measures

*Willingness to Reconcile the Relationship.* Three items were used to assess respondents' willingness to reconcile the relationship with their counterpart. These items were: "What is the likelihood that you would continue a business relationship with Pat," "To what degree are you willing to let Pat try to reconcile the relationship with you, given Pat's actions?" and "How difficult would it be to rebuild your relationship with Pat back to the point where it was before Pat changed the order?" The alpha reliability for these three items was .92.

*Control Variables.* We measured three control variables for inclusion in the between-subjects portion of the analysis. Negotiation experience was measured with a single item ("In terms of having experience as a negotiator, I consider myself: on a 7-point scale (1: not at all experienced, 7: very experienced)"). Also, age was determined, since people at different ages might exhibit different patterns of reconciliation based on life experience. Finally, gender was measured since recent exploratory work by Shapiro and Von Glinow (2000) suggests that gender may differentially impact forgiveness tendencies.

### Analyses

*Within-Subject Analysis.* Orthogonal contrast coding was used to identify the presence or absence of a particular level of independent variable within each scenario (Judge & Bretz, 1992). Since the apology factor contained three levels, we constructed two contrasts: first, we compared no apology with the combination of the apology with either an internal or external attribution (i.e., no apology coded as  $-2$ , and both apology with internal and apology with external attributions coded as 1). Second, we compared internal to external attributions (i.e., no apology coded as 0, internal attribution coded as 1, and external attribution coded as  $-1$ ).

Multiple regression analysis was used to estimate a regression equation for each respondent in the sample ( $n = 45$ ). Standardized regression coefficients represent the relative strength of the independent variables in predicting willingness to reconcile the relationship after a violation.

*Pooled Sample and Interaction Analyses.* Moderated multiple regression analysis was used to assess the relative effect of the manipulated variables on the dependent variable across all participants. Since each respondent made 48 decisions, there were 2160 (45 respondents  $\times$  48 scenarios) observations available for analysis. Relevant interaction terms were created, and added in the final step of the regression equations. For interactions involving the violation condition, the contrast code representing violation (i.e., high =  $-1$  and low =  $1$ ) was replicated and appended to each of the 48 responses made by each respondent. That is, in the present analysis, each time a respondent made a decision, that decision was made in the context of a high or low violation. This approach has been shown to be valid in prior research, since each decision made by a respondent is considered to be an independent event (Hays, 1981; Judge & Bretz, 1992).

## Results

A correlation matrix is presented in Table 1. In utilizing a completely crossed design to assess the effects of the within-subjects factors thought to bear on decisions to reconcile, the correlations among those factors are zero by definition. Nonetheless, they appear in the table along with other study variables to illustrate their correlations with the dependent variable. As expected, these correlations are largely consistent with results presented in the following sections.

### *Within-Subjects Analysis*

A separate regression equation was computed for each participant. To test for the possibility of participant fatigue in responding to the 48 scenarios, we compared the average variance explained in the first half and last half of each respondent's survey (Judge & Bretz, 1992). Had fatigue been influential, we might have expected decreased explained variance as respondents became tired and started using response sets (i.e., started responding in the same manner to each scenario or using patterned responses despite differences in scenarios). However, results indicated a slight *increase* of .05 in the average  $R^2$  value ( $t = 1.92$ , ns) between the first and second half responses. Thus, fatigue effects did not appear to factor into the study.

The degree to which individual respondents were consistent in their decision policies across all scenarios is represented by the  $R^2$  value of each person's regression equation. The range was .07–.78, and the mean value was .56 across all respondents. These results suggest that respondents were generally consistent in their responses to the manipulated variables. Also of interest, the percentages of respondents indicating a particular variable to be the most important component of their overall assessment (based on regression coefficient

Table 1  
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	29.55	4.67									
2. Gender <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	-.17**								
3. Negotiation experience	3.73	1.1840	.19**	-.26**							
4. Magnitude of violation <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	-.21**	.13**	-.20**						
5. Apology condition <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	.00	.00	.00	.00					
6. Timeliness <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00				
7. Perceived sincerity <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00			
8. Nature of past relationship <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00		
9. Probability of future violation <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	— <sup>a</sup>	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	
10. Willingness to reconcile relationship	3.51	1.38	-.06**	-.06**	-.13**	.20**	.07**	.06**	.34**	.23**	.26**

Note. *N* = between 2112 and 2160 except for correlations among between-subjects factors (*n* = 45).

<sup>a</sup> Variable coded using orthogonal contrasts. For gender, female: 1 and male: -1. For other variables, higher values were assigned to theoretically optimal conditions. For example, magnitude of violation was coded 1 (low violation) and -1 (high violation); therefore, the .20 correlation between magnitude of violation and willingness to reconcile is interpreted as lower levels of violation relating to a greater willingness to reconcile the relationship. Or, since nature of past relationship was coded 1 (good) and -1 (poor), the .23 correlation between past relationship and willingness to reconcile is interpreted as a good past relationship relating to a greater willingness to reconcile the relationship.

\*\* *p* < .01.

magnitudes) were as follows: sincerity, 51%; probability of future violation, 24%; nature of past relationship, 18%; apology (vs. no apology), 4%; and nature of attribution, 2%.

### *Pooled Sample and Interaction Results*

Moderated regression analysis was used to estimate the relative weight given to each independent variable in predicting willingness to reconcile the relationship. This analysis was pooled across subjects, but contained multiple responses by each individual. Although each response was thought to be independent (Hays, 1981), it was necessary to verify the independence of the observations. Specifically, autocorrelation, or a positive correlation between error terms may be present (Hanushek & Jackson, 1977). The Durbin-Watson statistic provides a measure of autocorrelation, with an expected value of 2.0 when no autocorrelation is present. In the pooled regression equation using the five within-subjects variables to predict willingness to reconcile the relationship, the statistic was 1.56.

Rynes, Weber and Milkovich (1989) offer a means of neutralizing problems introduced by autocorrelation. They recommend creating dummy variables representing every subject in a within- and between-subjects design. Thus, in the present design,  $n-1$ , or 44 dummy variables were created. When entered in the first step of a pooled sample regression equation, these dummy variables partial out the idiosyncratic variance of each participant. This serves to not only control for autocorrelation, but also participant characteristics such as age, gender, or negotiating experience. Therefore, any variance attributable to these latter three variables was automatically accounted for in this first step.

Results of the pooled sample regression analysis are presented in Table 2. As shown, the participant control variables accounted for 38% of the variance in willingness to reconcile the relationship. That is, 38% of the variance in willingness to reconcile appears to be attributable to individual differences among respondents. After this step, we entered the main effects. Combined, these effects explained an additional 25% of the variance in the dependent variable, and provide support for Hypotheses 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 5, and 6. Specifically, all independent variables have significant regression coefficients in the expected direction in Step 2. Beta weights shown in Table 2 suggest a relative hierarchy of importance among the independent variables in predicting willingness to reconcile, with sincerity weighted most heavily, followed by probability of future violation and nature of the past relationship.

Hypothesized interaction terms were entered as a block in an additional step following the main effects. As shown in Table 2, this interaction block was significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .01$ , adjusted  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Examination of the specific interaction terms within the block revealed several effects. First, in support of Hypothesis 4a, the interaction between sincerity and apology condition (i.e., presence or absence of an apology) was significant. That is, the slope of the relationship between apology condition and willingness to reconcile increased as sincerity increased, meaning that apologies carry even more weight relative to no apologies when they are perceived to be sincere. Next, magnitude of violation and nature of past relationship (Hypothesis 7d) interacted such that past relationship was more positively related to willingness to reconcile when a *high* rather than low violation existed. When a low violation existed, individuals did not place as much weight on the nature of the past relationship when assessing willingness to reconcile. Finally, probability of future violation interacted with magnitude of violation (Hypothesis 7e), such that probability of

Table 2  
Results of pooled regression analysis

Independent variables	$\beta$	S.E.
Step 1: participant dummy variables		
$\Delta R^2$ /adjusted $\Delta R^2$	.38**	.37**
Step 2: main effects <sup>a</sup>		
Apology <sup>b</sup>		
Contrast 1: apology vs. no apology	.073**	.013
Contrast 2: internal vs. external attribution	.033*	.023
Timeliness	.065**	.018
Sincerity	.343**	.018
Nature of past relationship	.230**	.018
Probability of future violation	.260**	.018
$\Delta R^2$ /adjusted $\Delta R^2$	.25**	.25**
Step 3: interaction terms		
Sincerity $\times$ apology, Contrast 1	.048**	.013
Sincerity $\times$ apology, Contrast 2	.007	.023
Violation $\times$ apology, Contrast 1	-.016	.013
Violation $\times$ apology, Contrast 2	.005	.023
Violation $\times$ timeliness	.008	.019
Violation $\times$ sincerity	-.003	.019
Violation $\times$ past relationship	-.037**	.019
Violation $\times$ probability of future violation	.046**	.019
$\Delta R^2$ /adjusted $\Delta R^2$	.01**	.01**
Total model $R^2$ /adjusted $R^2$	.63**	.62**

Note.  $N = 2160$ .

<sup>a</sup> Violation condition (high or low violation) would normally be entered as a main effect in Step 2 prior to being included in the interaction analyses. However, its main effects are accounted for in Step 1, which controls for the idiosyncratic effects of each participant using the Rynes et al. (1989) approach.

<sup>b</sup> The apology condition was contrast coded such that Contrast 1 compared the effects of no apology vs. apologies with internal and external attributions. Contrast 2 compared the effects of apologies with internal attributions vs. those with external attributions.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

future violation was more positively related to willingness to reconcile when a low, rather than when a high violation existed. Thus, whereas Hypotheses 4a and 7e were supported, Hypotheses 1c, 4b, and 7a–c were not supported, and the results of Hypothesis 7d were significant but in the opposite direction of what were expected.

Finally, we note that relationship characteristics (the broader context of the relationship comprising its history and anticipated future) were consistently strong predictors of willingness to reconcile. In terms of offender tactics, only sincerity emerged as a fairly strong predictor. To further investigate the relative efficacy of these two categories, we conducted post hoc analyses to examine possible augmentation effects. That is, we were interested in determining whether relationship characteristics explained variance in willingness to reconcile beyond the variance explained by offender tactics, and vice versa. Results indicated that both categories exhibited an augmentation effect. Specifically, when entered in a

separate step after offender tactics, relationship characteristics explained an additional 12% of the variance in willingness to reconcile ( $\Delta R^2 = .12$ , adjusted  $\Delta R^2 = .12$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Offender tactics explained an additional 13% of the variance beyond relationship characteristics ( $p < .01$ ). In sum, both categories were predictive of the outcome independent of the other category, with equivalent contributions from each.

## Discussion

The present study empirically tested several ideas presented in Lewicki and Bunker's (1996) model of trust repair by investigating the antecedents to a victim's willingness to reconcile a relationship following a trust violation in a calculus-based trust context. Specifically, we found that victims are more willing to reconcile with offenders who offer an apology (with either an external or internal attribution) than with offenders who merely attempt to placate the victim. Given that glib restorative attempts are common when trust is broken, it is instructive to note that explicit apologies are likely to meet with more success. Also, we found evidence that an apology using an internal attribution was more effective than an apology using an external attribution. This finding suggests that victims appreciate it when offenders take full responsibility for their actions instead of attempting to shift culpability elsewhere. Further, it is consistent with research indicating that the provision of excuses to reduce personal responsibility tends to compromise the credibility and character of the offender in the eyes of others (Schlenker et al., 2001), which is associated with a lower willingness to reconcile. Finally, timeliness, sincerity, a good past relationship, and a low probability of a future violation are all positively related to a willingness to reconcile the relationship.

The sincerity of the apology demonstrated the strongest main effect, indicating that victims pay a great deal of attention to the offender's perceived sincerity in expressing apologies. Moreover, there was a significant sincerity by apology interaction effect, such that sincerity magnified the beneficial effect of an apology (as opposed to no apology). Once again, efforts to simply placate the victim following a transgression may yield dim prospects (even when done with high sincerity), whereas sincere apologies are more effective regardless of the attribution given in the apology.

Also, we examined the effect of the magnitude of violation as a moderating variable, such that as magnitude of violation increases, the positive effects of the independent variables will be attenuated. Although the interaction with past relationship was significant, it took a different form than what we hypothesized. Specifically, under a low magnitude violation condition, the nature of the past relationship did not affect the willingness to reconcile as strongly as when there was a high violation. This suggests that when a high violation occurs, individuals rely more heavily on the past history of the relationship in determining their willingness to reconcile than they do when the violation is not as severe. As expected, when the magnitude of violation is low, willingness to reconcile increases as the probability of future violation becomes smaller. But when the magnitude of violation is high, the beneficial effect of a low future probability carries much less weight on willingness to reconcile. After a severe violation, it is likely that the victim is so preoccupied with the aftermath of the violation that their relationship with the offender in the future becomes

of little consideration in the decision of whether to reconcile. Indeed, after a very severe trust violation, a relationship may terminate entirely, precluding the relevance of future interaction with the offender (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996).

Perhaps the most interesting finding of the study is that relationship characteristics appear to be just as important as offender tactics in predicting willingness to reconcile a CBT relationship. Based on intuition and everyday experience, it seems natural to assume that things such as timely and sincere apologies are most critical in the trust repair process, especially in a CBT context. While not undermining the importance of these tactics, it appears that equally critical drivers of willingness to reconcile are grounded in past and future relationship characteristics. Many individuals may attempt restorative efforts, believing that short-term, post-violation tactics within their immediate control offer them the best prospects for repairing a professional relationship after they have violated the victim's trust. Our findings suggest that the broader context of the relationship (which is less accessible to the offender's immediate influence) is just as important as these tactics.

### *Practical Implications*

Several practical implications can be drawn from this study to assist those who wish to rebuild the trust of their colleagues after breaking a promise. First, offenders should always give an explicit apology in the wake of a trust violation. Victims of trust violations appreciate receiving an actual apology (Ohbuchi et al., 1989), and are not as willing to reconcile a relationship when the offender overlooks the apology. A second implication is that offenders should strive to respond in a *timely* manner that conveys *sincere* regret for the harm imposed on the victim. Third, our findings suggest that victims find an apology to be more effective when offenders clearly admit their personal culpability for a violation. However, we should note that this was a single apology for a single transgression. Repeated apologies, even those that take personal responsibility, may be likely to diminish the perceived effectiveness because the offender may not appear to be sincere in finding ways to reduce the frequency of the violations. Fourth, when promises must be broken, offenders are urged to seek out ways to minimize the harmful impact of the violation on the victim. Severe violations are difficult to reconcile, and they may prompt the victim to scrutinize the past relationship history more carefully when assessing their willingness to reconcile. Finally, offenders should consider the complete context of their relationship history with their colleagues. Actions of the past and an awareness of the victim's expectations about what will take place in the future will heavily impact willingness to reconcile, and may override the impact of any short-term reconciliation tactics. Offenders are advised to provide social accounts with adequate information and interpersonal sensitivity for important decisions that may adversely affect colleagues (Bies, 1987b; Sitkin & Bies, 1993), and take steps to assure colleagues that future trust violations will not occur.

### *Limitations*

Some limitations in the current study need to be addressed. First, policy-capturing necessitates generation of a specific background scenario as the platform for making decisions. We took great care to formulate a realistic negotiation situation that incorporates factors

that are thought to be essential across a variety of contexts. However, the specific example used and the scenario-based nature of the present study leaves room for future researchers to explore the impact of these variables in other data collection contexts. That is, since we operationalized a broken promise within the context of a business negotiation, we acknowledge the possibility that the process of reconciliation in this instance may not generalize to other types of professional and personal relationships. Likewise, our study may not capture dynamics in relationships that exist at a higher level of trust or violations other than explicit, broken promises. Second, there is reason to believe that the five within-subjects variables in the present study are not orthogonal in actual situations. For example, it is likely that the nature of the past relationship is related to the perceived probability of future violation. However, in line with our focus, we opted to establish orthogonality to better isolate the unique independent effects of the hypothesized factors. Also, had past relationship been related to future violation, we would have expected these two variables to interact similarly with magnitude of violation. Instead, the two variables exhibited opposite interactive effects with magnitude of violation in predicting willingness to reconcile. Third, the interaction block of the between-subjects analyses only showed a small practical effect size. These findings should be taken with caution and replicated in future research. Finally, this study only considered *willingness* to reconcile, and did not capture changes in actual reconciliation or the rebuilding of broken trust. Although research has suggested that intentions can predict subsequent behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and that reconciliation cognitions can predict reconciliation behaviors (Aquino et al., 2001; Festinger, 1957), research needs to study these empirical relationships in greater depth.

### *Future Research*

In addition to those already suggested, several interesting research opportunities evolve from this study. First, future research should further clarify the relative effectiveness of apologies versus other tactics. For example, recent findings by Kim, Dirks, Ferrin and Cooper (2002) suggest that denial can be another viable alternative for offenders who seek to reconcile with victims. Second, since this study is predicated on an arms-length business relationship, the findings may not generalize to professional relationships where the parties are also close friends with one another. Future research should address the impact of different relationship contexts. Third, we did not examine the use of reparations to compensate the victim. For example, repayment of financial damages (or even punitive damages) may enhance the reconciliation process (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Fourth, research needs to empirically establish the connection between willingness to reconcile and actual relationship reconciliation, and in turn, the process of rebuilding trust.

In conclusion, this study identified a number of variables critical to the reconciliation process. It should be stressed that full reconciliation is likely to be a complex process. This fact should reinforce the urgency of nurturing good relationships with a bright future, and strongly deter actors from engaging in egregious acts that might antagonize relationship partners and cause them to perceive broken promises. Moreover, it should be stressed that when broken promises do occur, it is important to engage in tactics to restore at least a modicum of the trust that was broken to facilitate functional workplace relationships and to embark on the road to full relationship recovery.

## Appendix A. Example Background Information (High Violation Condition)<sup>1</sup>

### *Negotiation Situation*

Please read the following information, and try to put yourself into this situation as it is described.

You and Pat are small business owners. You run a printing company that supplies point-of-sale advertising materials (e.g., posters, graphics, flyers, bottle labels, etc.). Pat's company bottles fruit juice for distribution. You have been supplying many different juice bottle labels to Pat for 3 years.

The two of you have recently been discussing a deal for the production and purchase of orange juice labels. This contract will provide for a significant portion of your quarterly revenue (as orange juice labels typically represent 66% of your business with Pat). The two of you have already come to an informal (but unwritten) agreement that you would get the orange juice label contract for 500,000 labels for the upcoming quarter. On the basis of this, you have ordered the paper, inks and other materials for this job, and had intended to begin the work next week.

At a weekend golf outing, Pat just informed you that the bottling company only intended to purchase 100,000 labels. You are very upset about this turn of events. The impact of this change translates into \$40,000 in lost revenue, assuming you can return or reuse the materials you have already ordered. The change of the orange juice agreement does not affect other current orders on juice labels for apple, grape, and grapefruit juice (the other 34% of your business with Pat). These other orders account for approximately \$26,000 in revenue for the quarter.

Keeping the above background information in mind, and placing yourself in the role of the printing company owner/negotiator as described above, please read each scenario that follows and answer the accompanying questions. Although many of these scenarios will appear to be quite similar, each one is different in some way. Please read each situation separately and answer the questions each time, looking at all the pieces of the problem:

### **Note**

1. In the low violation condition, orange juice represents 34% of business with Pat. The bottling company only intends to purchase 450,000 labels, translating into \$5,000 in lost revenue. Other orders account for \$80,000 in revenue (other 66% of business with Pat).

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