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THE EFFECT OF LEADER APOLOGY ON LEADER AVOIDANCE OF FOLLOWERS

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Abstract

Previous studies on the effectiveness of apologies have been mixed at best, but apology continues to be a popular strategy for recovering from mistakes. Apology may be especially important for leaders, who must continue to work with followers despite the effect that these mistakes can have on their relationships. Using Ren & Gray’s (2009) theoretical framework as a guide, this study examined the recovery methods that leaders choose after public and private mistakes and the resulting level of avoidance of their followers. A field sample of 278 leaders and a lab study of 92 participants in leadership roles suggest that leaders are more likely to apologize for mistakes that occur in public rather than in private contexts, and leaders who apologize are less likely to avoid their followers after the mistake. Furthermore, men were more likely than women to avoid followers after a mistake. The implications of these findings and the need to extend theory to include context and gender are also discussed.
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The Effect of Leader Apology on Leader Avoidance of Followers

Conventional wisdom suggests that an apology is the best way for a leader to recover from a mistake, but people who apologize are not always seen in a positive light. Although some research suggests that apologies have beneficial outcomes (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Lee, Peterson, & Tiedens, 2004; Kim et al, 2006; Obhuchi et al., 1989), others found that apologies result in negative ratings on
hypothetical interviews (Kim et al., 2006; Tsai et al., 2010), greater penalization for speeding through a red light (Cody & McLaughlin, 1988), lower forgiveness (Struthers et al., 2008), and even increased levels of retaliation (Zechmiester & Garcia, 2004). Furthermore, apologies may be especially detrimental for follower perceptions of leader competence. Cushenbery and Hunter’s (2012) laboratory study found that apologies were the least effective recovery strategy for leaders, with follower reactions faring even worse than if the leader had not made a mistake. This study contended that the apology is ultimately an admission of guilt that can lower follower confidence in the leader’s ability. Thus, conventional wisdom may not always apply to follower perceptions of leader recovery from mistakes – apologies may, at times, do more harm than good.

The gap between conventional wisdom and the mixed research support for the effectiveness of apology illustrates an emergent contradiction in understanding the role of apologies in leadership and error recovery. Although the recovery strategy may be ineffective for restoring perceptions of leader competence, apologizing is universally acknowledged as a vital part of healthy relationships (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Ferrin et al., 2007; Ohbuchi et al. 1989; Schwartz, Kane, Joseph, & Tedeschi, 1978; Wood & Mitchell, 1981). As a means to remedy this apparent contradiction, the present study contends that the value of apologies is not necessarily in regaining lost trust or repairing weakened follower perceptions of the leader. Rather, apologies may be most beneficial for the person apologizing, particularly when that person is in a leadership position.

To understand the error recovery process, this study explored leader recovery in different contexts (mistakes that occurred in private vs. public) and through different perspectives (men and women). Testing and extending Ren and Gray’s (2009) framework of restoration processes for relationship conflict, this study examined the relationship between leader error recovery strategies and the subsequent behavior of leaders toward their followers. A field sample of leaders was asked to reflect on their previous private and public mistakes and how they interacted with their followers afterward. In
the laboratory study, participants were assigned a leadership role and were led to believe that they made a mistake. Participant leaders were videotaped and the leader’s response to a follower’s email request indicated their willingness to interact with followers. In these two studies, I suggest that the recovery strategy that leaders use predicts their avoidance of followers, and that these behaviors are influenced by context and gender.

**A Theoretical Framework for Relationship Restoration**

According to Ren and Gray (2009), a discrepancy between a transgressor’s actions and a victim’s expectations in a relationship can cause conflict and have negative consequences for organizational life. In their theoretical framework, Ren and Gray describe a relationship conflict restoration process by which victims challenge transgressors to acknowledge the conflict; the transgressor responds by taking some form of restorative action (e.g., apology, account, demonstration of concern, and/or penance), and there is a restoration of equilibrium. The framework describes two different types of mistakes (violations of identity and violations of control) that can occur in two different cultural contexts (individualistic and collectivist). Furthermore, the framework suggests that at the dyadic level, an effective resolution of relationship conflict results in a willingness to interact in the future. Although an extensive test of the model is beyond the scope of this study, I focused specifically on violations of control, referred to as task mistakes, and considered the influence of context and norms on the recovery strategy that a transgressor chooses.

Ren and Gray’s framework suggests that context can influence the effectiveness of recovery strategies because of the expected norms of transgressors and victims. Their framework focused on cultural context, however, specifically the differences between norms in individualistic and collectivist cultures. This study seeks to further extend this proposed influence of context and norms by considering conflict between transgressors and victims of unequal status (e.g., a leader-follower relationship).
Furthermore, the norms associated with conflict repair and the resulting behaviors may also depend on a transgressor’s gender.

Conflict can be especially difficult in leader-follower relationships because leaders’ position of responsibility for others creates a uniquely complex role for dealing with errors and error recovery. Followers look to leaders to guide them in times of stress or change (Drath, McCauley, Palus, Van Velsor, O’Connor, McGuire, 2008; Hunt, Boal, & Dodge, 1999), but leaders may sometimes be the cause of that stress. It may be especially difficult for leaders to focus on managing others when distracted by a personal failure. An apology can encourage the leader to quickly make a personal recovery in order to repair the leader-follower relationship and restore the social order (Ren & Gray, 2009). Thus, the possible benefits of apology may be particularly important for those in leadership positions. The unique aspects of leadership mistakes are further discussed in the following section.

Conceptual figure of study hypotheses

Errors and Leadership

Leader error is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of leader behaviors. Leader errors occur when an avoidable action (or inaction) is chosen by a leader that results in an initial outcome
outside of the leader’s original intent, goal, or prediction (Hunter, Tate, Dziewezynski, & Cushenbery, 2010). Previous work on errors has focused on defining and classifying the types of errors people make. Zhao and Olivera (2006) define a general error in organizations as “a decision or behavior that 1) results in an undesirable gap between an expected and real state and 2) may lead to actual or potential negative consequences for organizational functioning that could have been avoided” (p. 1013). Others have framed error more simply as a failure in achieving a specific goal (Zapf & Reason, 1994) or as whatever everyone agrees it to be (Reason, 1990). More specific to the present study, a leader error is defined as “an avoidable action or inaction chosen by a leader that results in an initial outcome outside of the leader’s original intent, goal, or prediction” (Hunter et al., 2011). For the purposes of this research, this study will examine errors with negative consequences but acknowledge the possibility that errors may sometimes result in serendipitous outcomes (Keith & Frese, 2008).

Furthermore, several scholars have attempted to create taxonomies of the different types of errors that leaders make. McCall and Lombardo (1983) interviewed managers that failed in their positions at Sears department stores. This work identified four categories for describing leadership failures: problems with interpersonal relationships, the inability to meet business objectives, a difficulty in building teams, and problems with adapting to change. Along the same lines, Kusy and Essex (2005) interviewed forty leaders and suggested a more specific set of seven categories for leader errors: failure to use staff talent, failure to align goals with strategic initiatives, failure to accurately assess political dynamics, failure to identify follower readiness level for a given assignment, failure to effectively utilize information or the right process to make decisions, failure to create a work environment where staff openly communicate, and failure to bring the right talent into an organization. Furthermore, they concluded that the two mistakes that are “non-recoverable” are those dealing with integrity and a pattern of multiple mistakes. Collectively, this work suggests a somewhat simple but important point: leader roles are complex, and there are many different possibilities for the occurrence of errors.
The theoretical framework put forth by Ren and Gray (2009) reduces error types more generally to a dichotomy between identity violation and violation of control. The relationship mistake, or identity violation, occurs when normative boundaries that preserve identity are crossed, the victim loses self-respect, and the transgressor does not show consideration for the victim. In contrast, the task mistake, or violation of control, occurs when the transgressor blocks the victim's goals, access to resources, or information that the person believes they are entitled to. This dichotomy of error types maps on well to the two-factor model of leadership that suggests that leader behaviors can also be summarized in two general categories—initiating structure (managing tasks) and consideration (managing people) (Stogdill, 1974; Thoroughgood, Sawyer, & Hunter, 2012). A recent effort by Bedell-Avers (2008) used a historiometric approach to examine the mistakes of over 70 leaders with this same basic framework. This study found that although social errors (relationship mistakes) have a greater impact on leader performance and follower loss of support, cognitive errors (task mistakes) occur most frequently. In the present study, I will focus on leader task mistakes because of their common presence in leader-follower relationships.

These previous studies were among the few that examined the role of errors in the process of leadership. There are only a small number of empirical studies of leader mistakes because errors are incongruent with the general positive perception of leaders. The heroic leadership bias present in both the research literature and popular opinion suggests an image of leaders as infallible (Meindhl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985; Meindhl & Ehrlich, 1987; Yukl, 2006). However, a growing body of literature suggests that leaders are not only vulnerable to making mistakes, but they may be more prone to make mistakes because of the complexity of their position (Finklestein, 2003; Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Consequently, errors may be particularly important for the study of leadership for three key reasons: the leader's position of power makes mistakes especially 1) likely, 2) visible, and 3) harmful. I elaborate on each of these points below.
Leaders are likely to make errors. The leader’s role is a complex interaction of quick decisions, imperfect information, and many moving parts. Hunter and colleagues (2011) elaborate on several multilevel factors that can make errors an inevitable part of leaders’ daily activities. At the individual level, leader dispositions such as a high need for closure or overconfidence can cause leaders to make decisions prematurely and persist in pursuing risky strategies despite contrary evidence. Experience, expertise, stress, and affect can exacerbate the effects of these individual differences. In particular, people in positions of powers have been shown to be poor planners because they have a history of getting whatever they have asked for (Weick & Guinote, 2010). These previous experiences of success mean leaders may be more likely than non-leaders to plan according to “best-case scenarios” rather than realistic expectations (Weick & Guinote, 2010).

Antecedents for errors may also come from the group and the organization level. At the group level, Hunter et al. (2011) suggest that group climate may prevent the expression of opposing ideas that buffer the risks of overconfidence. In addition, an overreliance on key subordinates can result in misinformation that also leads to mistakes. At the organizational level, companies with a history of flawed error management culture and an emphasis on time rather than quality may cause leaders to prioritize fast solutions without allowing sufficient time to confirm their value. The errors that occur in different levels of an organization can be compounded across levels, and over time the cross level effects may exacerbate the effects of any single errors.

Leader mistakes are especially visible in organizations. As a result of their positions of power, leaders are considered public figures within (and sometimes beyond) their organizations. Their positions require them to be involved in others’ errors and role model an appropriate response to failure. Leaders exemplify organizational standards for error recovery strategies by communicating with employees about errors, sharing knowledge about previous errors, helping others detect and analyze errors, and coordinate error recovery efforts (Van Dyck, Frese, Baer, & Sonnentag, 2005). Furthermore, as the
people who are in charge of maintaining high performance in organizations, leaders may be held to higher standards for behavior. Society tends to associate errors with incompetence (Edmondson, 1996), a view that is especially problematic for the figures that are entrusted with authority over others.

**Leader mistakes can be damaging for organizations.** The leadership position is one of influence, and a leader’s mistake can have far reaching effects on followers, teams, and organizations (Finkelstein, 2003). In particular, unresolved leader mistakes can have negative consequences for organizational interpersonal dynamics. Davidhizar and Laurent (2000) suggested that interpersonal conflict between leaders and followers resulted in lower personal and team productivity. Furthermore, their study suggested that leader-follower conflict can result in both aggressive and passive aggressive behavior. To cope with conflict, employees can either detach or engage in destructive politics, impacting the organization at multiple levels (Stone, 2002).

Moreover, leader mistakes and responses to these mistakes shape an organization’s error management culture. A positive error management culture has been shown to influence firm performance, firm goal achievement, and firm survivability (Van Dyck, Frese, Baer, & Sonnentag, 2005). If leaders attempt to cover up an error, they are impeding the systematic thinking that would promote processes designed to prevent future errors (Edmondson, 1996). Leader responses to mistakes can also have a trickle-down effect on employee recovery tactics. Fast and Tiedens (2010) have shown that social contagion occurs when leaders blame others and otherwise respond negatively to mistakes. As a result, leader mistakes can be more influential and potentially more damaging than those of other employees’, creating a unique context for the dynamics of leader error recovery.

A leader’s visibility and responsibility for others creates a lot of pressure for leaders to behave in an appropriate manner. Leaders can be especially sensitive to their own errors and error recovery because of this constant focus on performance. Failure results in a stressful cognitive process that can affect how a leader views his or her own skills and abilities. Consequently, the process of error recovery
has unique implications for leaders. Following the negative impact of a mistake, leaders must balance maintaining their responsibility and image to organizational stakeholders with their own psychological needs. The leader must choose between several recovery strategies, such as apologizing for a mistake or making excuses, in order to best manage follower impressions while maintaining a positive leader identity.

In summary, leaders have a series of choices to make following a mistake in how much responsibility to take for an error. The dynamic context in which they operate makes the choice of error recovery a complex series of trade-offs. In the next section, I discuss the different error recovery strategies that leaders may choose. Previous research on recovery has developed five general categories of defensive impression management techniques to address mistakes: apologizing, providing an excuse, justifying one’s actions, denying wrongdoing, and ignoring the mistake all together (Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, & Dirks, 2007; Schonbach, 1990; Tata, 2000). However, each of these error recovery strategies has a set of unique trade-offs for both leaders and followers. These are discussed in greater detail in the following section.

**Leader Responses to Mistakes**

According to Ren and Gray’s (2009) framework, a transgressor’s response to a mistake can bring about the restoration of the social order. Furthermore, the recovery strategy can redefine the perceptions of the mistake depending on the actions that the transgressor takes. Thus, choosing the appropriate response to a mistake is an important factor in the success of the relationship repair. However, this theoretical framework assumes that transgressor’s only goal is to reconcile, a view that may over-simplify the variety of motives that people have for choosing a recovery strategy. This point is especially salient for leaders, whose roles involve a complex series of interactions between multiple competing priorities.
Leaders must choose an appropriate strategy to recover from their mistake, and this strategy may depend on the level of responsibility they are willing to take. For example, an apology may be an effective strategy when leaders are willing to assume all responsibility for a mistake. However, it may make sense to employ a different recovery strategy in situations where the leader is not really at fault or it would be particularly damaging to point out their mistakes to others. These other recovery strategies vary on how much responsibility the leader assumes. In contrast to apologies where leaders take full responsibility for a mistake, the tactics of denials and reticence assume no responsibility for an error and excuses assume only partial responsibility. The following strategies are presented in order by the tactic that assumes the most responsibility to the tactic that assumes the least responsibility (Tata, 2000).

**Taking Full Responsibility: Leader Apology**

Apologies are so ubiquitous that they have become an expected social norm (House, 1989). When giving an apology, the transgressor acknowledges the harm that was done, shows regret, and explicitly or implicitly promises not to repeat the offense (Ren & Gray, 2009). Apologies are also referred to as concessions, penitential accounts, admissions of guilt (Tata, 2000) and have multiple functions for the parties involved. A speaker-supportive function describes apologies as a method of improving the transgressor image, while a hearer-supportive perspective focuses on a restoration of the victim’s feelings (Meier, 1998). However, perceptions of apologies may be very different between victims and transgressors.

**Victim perceptions of apology.** The research on the perceptions of apologies has suggested mixed results for their effectiveness for restoring victims’ evaluations of transgressors. Several vignette studies have suggested that people respond favorably to those who apologize after a mistake (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Kim et al, 2006; Obhuchi et al., 1989), even for managers. A vignette study by Lee, Peterson and Tiedens (2004) found that participants had significantly more favorable impressions of managers in a company that made internal attributions rather than external attributions. Apologies
were seen as most effective when they included expressions of remorse and offers of reparation (Darby and Schlenker, 1989; Scher and Darley, 1997). Frantz and Bennigson (2005) suggest that these elements are effective because they make apologies appear more sincere.

Other studies suggest that different recovery strategies may be more effective than apologies. For example, providing excuses can be more effective for improving perceptions of the transgressor (Folger & Martin, 1986; Gonzales et al., 1992; Shapiro, 1991; Shapiro et al., 1994; Sitkin & Bies, 1993). Not only are apologies often ineffective for restoring perceptions, but Kador (2008) suggests that a transgressor’s apology puts the victim in the uncomfortable position of consoling the transgressor. It is socially desirable for the follower to respond with forgiveness whether or not they have truly forgiven the transgression, even if the transgressor apologizes before the victim is ready to end the conflict (Frantz & Bennigson, 2005). This tension between external social constraints and the internal reluctance for de-escalation may further limit the effectiveness of apologies as a form of conflict resolution (Frantz & Bennigson, 2005). Furthermore, Ren and Gray (2009) suggest that there are ritualistic behaviors for victims in response to a reconciliation attempt by the transgressor, where the victim can extend forgiveness and the transgressor is then expected to show a sign of gratitude to the victim. Clearly, these ritualistic behaviors between victims and transgressors may be altered when a transgressor has influence over the victim.

Other researchers have found that people’s reaction to an apology depends on the type of error that was made. If the mistake indicates a lack of competence, an apology is most appropriate because it implies that the transgressor will put in more effort in the future (Kim et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2006; Tsai et al., 2011). However, people make more stable attributions for mistakes involving integrity. Transgressions that suggest a lack of integrity are the most difficult to recover from, particularly for leaders (Kusy & Essex, 2007). In transgressions involving integrity, the most effective method of recovery is to attempt to deny or blame others for the mistake (Kim et al, 2004; Kim et al., 2006; Tsai et al., 2011).
However, when this principle is applied to apologies made by corporations rather than individuals, research suggests that apologies can also be effective for integrity errors (Bradford & Garrett, 1995). Thus, research is still inconsistent in finding that apologies are effective for improving victim perceptions of the transgressor.

**Leader motives for apologizing.** Despite mixed results for the victims of perceptions, apologies may have a variety of benefits for transgressors. In particular, leaders may personally gain from apologizing to followers. There are several ways that apologies can help leaders recover from their own failures. Apologizing allows leaders to feel like they are taking a positive, tangible action to restore the damage from their mistake. People are motivated to protect, maintain, or enhance their positive self-concept (Campbell & Sedikides 1999; Sedikides & Strube, 1997), and apology can be a way of restoring a leader’s self-image. In addition, apology encourages the leader to shift their focus from rumination and take steps to repair the leader-subordinate relationship, consequently reducing guilt. Therefore, despite the short-term costs of apology for follower perceptions of leader competence, there may be long-term benefits for leaders.

There is a great deal of evidence that people generally believe in the importance of apologies. As discussed previously, vignette studies suggest that people indicate apologies are the correct course of action when asked about hypothetical transgressions (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Obhuchi et al., 1989; Pontari, Schlenker, & Christopher, 2002). Those who apologize are seen as moral, self-sacrificial role models. Accordingly, one motivation for apologizing is simply the widely held perception that apologizing is the right thing to do. This alignment of ideals and behaviors may ease the stress of a leader’s failure. Although leaders may remain remorseful for their actions, apologizing has the potential to decrease rumination by allowing leaders to feel that they made an honest attempt to repair the mistake. By attempting to convince others that the mistake was not typical behavior, the transgressor splits their persona into a “bad” self that behaved poorly in the past contrast to a “good” self that
promises to behave better in the future (Tata 2000). Support for this view comes from regulatory theories of the self, which suggest that people are very motivated to see themselves in a positive light (Struthers, Dupuis, & Eaton, 2005).

**Leader apologies and leader-follower relationships.** Apology can also become an invitation for further dialogue about the event and creates the invitation for followers to discuss the event in a meaningful way. This sincere discussion about the leader’s mistake can result in a number of positive outcomes for followers. First, describing the antecedents of the error is an opportunity to teach subordinates what to do if they come across a similar situation. This lesson is not only useful for follower development, but also diffuses the responsibility of preventing this mistake from reoccurring (Van Dyck, Frese, Baer, & Sonnentag, 2005). Apologizing creates an opportunity for subordinates to learn from the leader’s mistake (Heimbeck, Frese, Sonnentag, & Keith, 2003).

Second, apologies can make leaders seem more accessible to followers. Disclosing information that makes the leader appear more human can improve the dyadic relationship between the leader and follower. A leader that takes time to apologize is showing the follower that they are important enough to go through the process of self-reflection. More importantly, an apology is a sign of respect for subordinates because it shows the followers that their opinions of their leader are so important that the leader is willing to change his or her behavior for them.

Third, discussing the event clarifies any discrepancies between the way that subordinates understood the event and the way that the leader understood it. Followers may not always be clear on their roles in their organization, especially since many organizations purposely have loosely defined roles. When a transgressor admits responsibility for the event, the apology can relieve subordinates’ uncertainty about their responsibility for the mistake (Struthers, Dupuis, & Eaton, 2005). By discussing what happened and who was at fault, the leader is clarifying each party’s roles for the follower. The
reconciliation of points of view between leaders and followers will aid in aligning team mental models, improving future communication (Mohammed & Dumville, 2001).

**Taking partial responsibility: Leader accounts and justifications**

**Accounts.** Rather than accepting full responsibility for a mistake, a leader may choose to provide an excuse for the event. An excuse is an acknowledgement of an event that includes an external mitigating circumstance that explains its occurrence (Schonbach, 1990; Tata, 2000). Excuses assume partial blame by recognizing that an event occurred, but simultaneously attempt to provide an alternative explanation that places the blame on some other person or thing.

People can sometimes give the appearance of apologizing as a thinly veiled excuse. For example, Hargie et al. (2010) studied bankers’ public responses to the failures that caused the economic slump in 2009. The bankers made a complex series of statements that mostly rejected responsibility for wrongdoing. Although the bankers technically used word that could suggest an apology, they took only partial responsibility for their failures with phrases implying that they were “sorry at” or “sorry about” the “turn of events”. This is an expression of sorrow about the outcome of the events, not an expression of guilt for individual actions. Furthermore, the bankers suggested a collective sorrow rather than personal responsibility, i.e. “we are sorry” rather than “I am sorry”. Finally, the bankers attempted to portray themselves as victims by pointing out that they had also suffered in the economic events. According to Hargie and colleagues, these statements attempt to attribute failure to systematic, unforeseen causes rather than individual actions. By acknowledging only partial responsibility for the mistake, the bankers attempted to dissociate themselves from the negative outcomes.

Making excuses can be a natural reaction for leaders in difficult situations. Individuals threatened by negative information often act in ways to offset or minimize the threat (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). As suggested by the attributions literature, making excuses can help a leader shift responsibility away from him or herself and avoid the negative consequences that are associated with
that responsibility (Lee & Robinson, 2000; Martinko & Gardner, 1987; Lepine & Van Dyne, 2001). To illustrate this point, Bies, Shapiro, and Cummings (1988) describes two goals in making excuses: the first goal of an excuse is to explain why the action occurred, and the second goal is to make the action appear appropriate under the circumstances. People are less punitive toward those who cause negative outcomes if they believe that situational constraints were responsible for their actions (Folkes, Koletsky, & Graham, 1987).

Justifications are a hybrid of excuses and apologies, where the leader accepts responsibility for a mistake but attempts to make it seem legitimate under the given circumstances (Schonbach, 1990, p. 80). Notably, justifications imply that the actor would choose the same action in a similar future event. The basis of this tactic, also known as the consensus argument, is that anyone in a similar situation would have acted as the leader had acted (Liden & Mitchell, 1988). Leaders attempt to gain sympathy for the difficult situations they had encountered. Alternatively, leaders may use justifications as a way of reinterpreting the events to focus on positive outcomes (Tata, 2000). For example, a leader may justify the use of overly critical negative feedback by explaining that the feedback will help the employee in the future.

**Follower perceptions of accounts.** Making excuses can be a viable option for improving the victim’s perceptions of the transgressor. According to Lee, Peterson, and Tiedens (2004), the attributions that are made in front of others can define, construct, and negotiate other people’s reality. For example, participants gave higher performance ratings and described an experimenter as more pleasant when the experimenter blamed someone else rather than apologizing for a feedback error (Zechmeister & Garcia, 2004). In addition, using accounts to shift blame to other sources was also more effective than apologies for recovering from errors of integrity in a video vignette study (Kim et al., 2006). In a study of presidential candidates, Zullow et al. (1988) found that those who used more external attributions for negative events won the presidential election 80% of the time. Finally, Baron’s
(1990) study suggested that making excuses was more effective for follower forgiveness of leaders who gave overly critical feedback. Thus, making excuses is often an effective form of error recovery.

However, others have identified negative consequences of excuses. Placing causality for important life events can result in a perceived loss of control over one’s life (Tennen & Affleck, 1990). The perception of a lack of control over events may be especially harmful to managers, whose job requires them to have some level of control over others in order to exert their authority. Several studies suggest that managers who make external attributions for negative events may be perceived as having less power and competence (Lee & Robinson, 2000) as well as generally less favorable (Lee & Tiedens, 2001a). Followers generally expect that managers have the status and resources necessary to assist in accomplishing work (Lee & Tiedens, 2001b). By making external attributions, managers are expressing that other people or environmental forces may have more power over events at work than managers do (Lee, Peterson, & Tiedens, 2004).

Blaming others, a form of excuses where attributions of failure are shifted to a specific individual or group, results in scapegoats receiving the negative consequences of an individual’s actions. A series of studies suggests that using blame to mitigate negative reactions to an error can be contagious and can lead to an organization-wide culture of blame (Fast & Tiedens, 2010). Instead, leaders may choose not to apologize or give excuses for their actions.

**Outcomes of accounts for leaders.** Although excuses can have both positive and negative effects for followers, previous studies suggest that making excuses for failures may have positive effects for leaders. The self-serving bias, a process where individuals have a tendency to make internal attributions for their successes and external attributions for their failures, can improve an individual’s self-esteem (Bradley, 1978; Lau & Russell, 1980). External attributions can help people cope with difficult events by relieving them of the stress of feeling responsible for their failures. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that people who regularly make stable, global, and internal attributions for
their mistakes tend to have more anxiety, depression, chronic health problems, and more failures in education, work, and marriage (Finchman & Bradbury, 1992; Peterson, 2000a).

**Taking No Responsibility: Leader Denials and Reticence**

When excuses are not appropriate, leaders can try denying responsibility for a mistake. There are two ways to accomplish this. A leader can ignore a mistake altogether, a strategy that may be particularly effective in the unequal status relationship where followers may not feel that confronting a leader is appropriate. Conversely, a leader can discuss a mistake but deny the legitimacy of the critic or use some other method of distracting his audience. When using a denial or ignoring the mistake all together, the leader assumes no responsibility for the mistake.

**Denials.** Denials can be an outright refusal to admit that wrongdoing had occurred. A more indirect method of denying a mistake is to shift attention to another aspect of the situation, such as by discrediting the source. Political leaders use a method of denying a criticism by discrediting the source of the criticism. For example, a historiometric study of leader responses to criticism suggested that a confrontation strategy where leaders made personal comments about the critic, compromised the credibility of the critic, or acted in an antagonistic manner was positively related to a successful resolution of the criticism (Eubanks, Antes, Friedrich, Caughron, Blackwell, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2010). Similar to the mechanisms used in successfully making excuses, the authors suggested that this form of denial allowed leaders to continue with their agenda or goals. However, key individuals described as “supportive others” (i.e. followers, the general public, or members of the leader’s political party), disapproved of leaders who used the confrontation response strategy. In other words, confrontations may be useful in diverting critics but is not an effective way to garner support from constituents.
Reticence. In some circumstances, leaders may prefer not to acknowledge the existence of the error at all. Some emerging literature suggests that reticence, a reluctance to confirm or disconfirm whether an allegation is true, can be an effective strategy in some situations (Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, & Dirks, 2007). Bello & Edwards (2005) describe this strategy as equivocation, the use of ambiguity to save face. Unlike a more straightforward denial, which forces leaders to take a clear stance on their responsibility for a mistake, this recovery method ignores the problem and claims no responsibility for as long as possible.

Leaders may use reticence for practical reasons. For example, leaders often feel that they should not fully explain their decisions to followers because of the sensitive nature of the information involved (Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 1998). It is also possible that leaders could be instructed to keep facts confidential and thus have no opportunity to provide an explanation. In addition, they may legitimately have limited time to provide adequate explanations and choose no explanation instead. The reticence strategy may also be useful in order to avoid drawing attention to a problem or redirecting attention to other issues without acknowledging the allegation (Benoit, 1997). Leaders may feel that giving no explanation can protect other people involved in the event. Reticence may be a strategic move in order to avoid implicating others (Ferrin et al., 2007) or leaking negative information that could affect public opinion or stock prices (Skarlicki, Folger, & Gee, 1998).

Choosing the correct strategy. As previously discussed, an inconsistency exists in the apology literature. As such, many studies called for the examination of moderators in future work on impression management strategies (Tsai et al., 2010). While some research suggests that apologies are an effective method of restoring trust (McCollough et al., 2003), perceptions of competence (Kim et al., 2006), and forgiveness (Fehr & Gelfland, 2010), others suggest that apology may be less effective than other impression management tactics. One problem with the apology literature is a focus on the mistake or
apology without regard for the relationship between parties or the larger context in which the mistake occurred (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006; Ren & Gray, 2009).

Previous studies of attributions suggest that context can change the expectations for apologies. Attribution can result in bad impressions of an actor when the actor is expected to be in control (i.e., a leader’s high status position), when the negative event was within the actor’s sphere of influence (i.e., an event in which the leader is directly involved), and when the actor’s actions are linked to others’ perceptions of him or her (i.e., when followers notice the leader’s actions) (Lee, Peterson, & Tiedens, 2004). In other words, followers would view an excuse unfavorably if the mistake was clearly the leader’s fault and the excuse was viewed as a thinly veiled attempt to regain favor. Furthermore, followers in long-term work relationships with their leaders have a better understanding of what leaders truly have control over. In these instances, followers may be more likely to notice when leaders attempt to give false accounts of events to present themselves in a better light (Lee, Peterson, & Tiedens, 2004).

For example, two studies by Tata and colleagues concluded with conflicting results about apologies. In one study, Tata (2002) found that apologies were an effective way to improve performance ratings by group members. In a second study, Tata (2000) found that apologies were ineffective for recovering from a sexual harassment charge.

The more ambiguous the cause of a negative event, the more decisions leaders will need to make when constructing others’ social perceptions of the event. Researchers have suggested that “weak situations”, which have more ambiguous information cues, create a situation where a greater variety of behavior is considered appropriate (Mischel, 1977). In contrast, “strong situations” have less ambiguity and behavior is more likely to be constrained by social context.

Thus, one proposed moderator of the relationship between apology and perceptions of effective leader error recovery may be the context in which the mistake occurs. Previous research has suggested that apologies are less likely for more severe mistakes (Schlenker & Darby, 1981), are offered with
similar frequency in both American and Chinese cultures (Han & Cai, 2010), and are more likely when the victim is likely to forgive (Leunissen, De Cremer, & Folmer, in press). Thus, the events that take place surrounding a failure event will be influential in determining the recovery strategies that leaders employ.

**Context and Leader Responses to Mistakes**

The theoretical framework put forth by Ren and Gray (2009) suggest that a missing component to the discussion of recovery tactics is the context and corresponding social norms in which the transgression occurs. There are some parallels between the influence of norms in the cultural contexts they described and the norms between leaders and followers. In the first step of their framework, Ren and Gray (2009) suggest that victims must challenge the transgressor to bring attention to the conflict. This challenge sequence is less likely in collectivistic cultures. Collectivistic cultures are more careful about saving face for others, and consequently victims would be less likely to approach transgressors with a direct challenge. In the same way, a low-status follower would put themselves at risk by challenging a superior in pointing out that they made a mistake, even if that mistake had a direct effect on the follower. Previous work suggests that face-saving behavior is more necessary when relationships are not close and when the two parties are of differing status (Baxter, 1984). Therefore, leaders may not feel the need to address their mistakes unless there is an implicit pressure to do so.

We propose that the nature of the event itself, whether a leader makes a mistake in private or in public, may be predictive of whether leaders discuss their mistake with followers. Namely, a private mistake is a more ambiguous situation that allows the transgressor to make choices about the amount of information they give followers. Leaders should be more motivated to apologize when the leader’s blameworthiness in the situation is less subjective. In other words, leaders may feel that they can only get away with excuses with private mistakes, when information about the event is unclear to followers and followers are unlikely to challenge them.
In the present study, by manipulating the amount of information that leaders know that followers have about a mistake, there is less room for ambiguity about the challenge process that Ren and Gray (2009) describe. In other words, leaders whose mistakes happen in front of followers have no need for the challenge process because there is a clear understanding by both parties that a mistake has been made. In contrast, leaders who make mistakes in private have less pressure to address the follower. Because of their higher status and greater control over information, they have the choice to keep the transgression from the follower altogether. Just as the collectivist victim may be less willing to challenge a transgressor in order for them both to save face, following a cultural norm, a follower is unlikely to challenge a leader’s mistake because of the norms for low-status and high-status individuals in relationships. It is therefore less likely that leaders will apologize for a mistake made in private. 

*Hypothesis 1: Leaders are more likely to apologize for a mistake made in public than a mistake made in private.*

Furthermore, the Ren & Gray (2009) model suggests a successful restoration of a dyadic relationship should result in both parties being willing to interact in the future. In other words, in a successful recovery event, leaders will be less likely to avoid followers after a transgression. Ren and Gray (2009) warn that using the incorrect recovery strategy may not only be ineffective for restoring a relationship, but can escalate the situation. I seek to test the Ren and Gray (2009) model of relationship repair by understanding how recovery strategy leads to dyadic conflict resolution.

The recovery method that a leader chooses not only impacts how much information followers have about the situation, but also their subsequent relationship with the leader. Recovery methods are important because they can shift the focus away from the leader’s self-perceptions and instead get him or her to think about followers. Taking responsibility by apologizing can encourage the leader to make a personal recovery and shift his or her attention back to followers, avoiding followers less.
An apology may be most likely to predict leader willingness to interact with followers because it may make leaders feel better about themselves. An apology can create the feeling of overcoming a personal obstacle because the leader is directly addressing the problem by taking responsibility for it. In addition, apology is a form of self-sacrifice and there is evidence that leader self-sacrifice is correlated with leader self-confidence (De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2004). Previous research has also suggested that those who are more willing to forgive themselves are more successful at focusing energy on correcting the behavior for the future (Wohl, Pytchel, & Bennett, 2010).

There is also evidence to suggest that not taking responsibility for a mistake can lead to avoiding those that were associated with it. A longitudinal study by McCullough, Bono, and Root (2007) found that people become more avoidant when ruminating about a transgression. More specific to the present study, managers try to distance themselves from bad news and negative events because of emotional discomfort, fear of being blamed, fear of making a bad situation worse, or even fear of providing a foundation for an eventual lawsuit (Folger & Skarlicki, 1998). However, this “distancing” by the manager actually makes these negative outcomes more likely, not less (Shaw et al., 2003). Consequently, conflict between leaders and followers can create an ambiguous social situation, and people often respond with avoidance when it is unclear what must be done (Goffman, 1967; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998). In contrast, apologizing may reduce a leader’s tendency to avoid subordinates after a negative event because it provides a clearer course of action. As previously discussed, the majority of people view apology as the best way to recover from mistakes, and acting in accordance with these norms can reduce the emotional distress from the event. Furthermore, an apology means that a leader is implicitly recommitting to a relationship, which requires approach behaviors rather than avoidance behaviors.

Hypothesis 2: Leaders who apologize are less likely to avoid subordinates in future interactions, and leaders who do not apologize are more likely to avoid subordinates.
Apology and Gender

Ren and Gray (2009) discuss the importance of culture in conveying social norms for expectations of appropriate behavior during conflict. They suggest that norms can influence both the selection of the restorative action (the recovery strategy) and the signaling of restored equilibrium (the conflict resolution and the willingness for the two parties to interact again). However, there are differences within cultures for social norms, particularly in the ways that men and women behave during conflict (Rudman & Glick, 1999; Tata, 2000). In this study, I will examine the recovery choice and the willingness to interact with followers for both male and female leaders.

Several researchers have suggested that apology is more in line with women’s communication style, which tends to be less assertive than men’s. According to Morgan and Lynch (2006), who discuss female leaders in the military, “women have a habit of using “I’m sorry” as a conversation starter, and this immediately undervalues their position. The authors suggest that rather than beginning a conversation with “I’m sorry” and positioning themselves as people undeserving of others’ time, female leaders should promote their image as people who can offer solutions to others’ problems. This perception may come from women’s historically subordinate status, their socialization to accommodate to others, and their focus on their personal faults (Exline & Zell, 2008). In a study where participants were asked to imagine themselves as a perpetrator in a variety of transgressions, women’s hypothetical responses were more complex, more conciliatory, and more focused on a concern for the face-saving of others (Gonzales, Manning, & Haugen, 1992).

Despite the popular assertion that women should be more likely to apologize, this claim has received little empirical evidence in the literature. Gender may be too broad of a category to use as a definitive predictor of leader apology because there is a great deal of variation within gender. Graziano et al. (1996) suggest that men who are highly agreeable did not differ from women in their observed dyadic conflict strategies; according to this dichotomy there are two different personality types – men
who are low on agreeableness in one group and agreeable men and women in another group (Graziano et al., 1996).

However, context may moderate the relationship between gender and the outcomes in conflict. Evidence from the negotiations literatures suggests that power and status may be more important than gender, but because status and gender are often correlated it is difficult to separate the two. People often unintentionally stereotype gender as a symbol of a person’s status (Eagly, 1983). Several studies suggest that power is a better predictor of negotiation outcomes than gender (Johnson, 1994; Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1985; Watson, 1994). Conflict and error recovery can be considered a type of negotiation, where error recovery is the resolution. Since status is held constant in the present experiment, gender may be less predictive of apology in this situation.

Another study suggests that differences in offering apologies may result from gender differences in how conflicts are perceived. Men may actually apologize just as much as women but are less likely to perceive that they’ve made a mistake. Schumann and Ross (2010) asked 33 men and 33 women to record conflicts with others for twelve days and report the gender of those making apologies. Women reported a greater number of apologies (217) than men (158), but women also reported committing more offenses (267) than men (196). The study concluded that men and women are equally likely to apologize for an offense, but women are more likely to categorize behavior as offensive and thus more likely to perceive that an offense occurred. Women’s greater likelihood of the perception of a transgression may explain the gender difference in offering apologies. Thus, men’s reticence to apologize may be a result of situational factors (evaluating situations as inoffensive) rather than dispositional factors (protecting the male ego) (Schumann & Ross, 2010).

In the present study, all participants were made aware that a transgression occurred, over-riding the need for individual evaluation of whether or not the mistake was offensive. Based on evidence from Schumann and Ross (2010), there should be no gender difference in the offer of an apology after a
transgression because the evaluation of whether a transgression occurred is held constant in the study situation. Therefore, I expected that male and female leaders in this study would be equally likely to offer apologies.

**H3a: Men and women are equally likely to apologize for a mistake.**

As suggested by Ren and Gray’s (2009) theoretical framework, successful relationship repair after a conflict includes the willingness for both parties to interact again in the future. I propose that this willingness to interact may be different for men and women. Although men and women may say the same things to followers, there may be gender differences in how they behave towards them afterwards, specifically with the level of avoidance they show. Several studies have suggested that men are significantly more avoidant in arguments than women (Bresnahan, Shearman, Lee, Ohashi, & Mosher, 2002; Burgoon et al., 1984; Nicotera & Rancer, 1994). When asked about effective behaviors in interpersonal conflict, men were more likely than women to choose power assertions such as physical action, criticism, making threats, and manipulation, behaviors that increase the distance between the transgressor and the victim (Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996).

Ren and Gray (2009) discuss conflict between parties as having more or less “face threat”, the maintenance of self-worth or self-image in a particular social situation. In this study, face threat is greatest in the public context because leaders may feel that followers are more likely to challenge them in that context. There is some evidence to suggest that men may be more sensitive to face threat than women. Previous research found that men are more sensitive to mistakes in general and find them more threatening to their personal identity than women (Baxter, 1984; Hodgins, 2003). Furthermore, men may have a lower threshold for face threat and may be more defensive than women toward victims in a conflict (Hodgins et al., 1996b). Consequently, this sensitivity to face threat may make men
more likely to avoid followers after a mistake, particularly in public mistakes when face threat is greatest.

_Hypothesis 3b: Gender moderates the relationship between error context and avoidance of followers such that men will avoid followers more than women when face threat is greatest._

**Study Contributions**

In addition to testing and extending Ren and Gray's (2009) theoretical framework for restoring relationship conflict, the present effort aims to advance the understanding of leader recovery from mistakes in four key ways. First, this study examines failure from the leader’s perspective and considers leader gender in recovery strategies. This study also offers a broader view of negative leadership behaviors that incorporates recovery from failure rather than examining only the failure itself. Finally, the experimental methodology provides some evidence of causality in leaders’ behaviors. I elaborate on each of these contributions below.

_A focus on the leader’s perspective._ Previous research has explored reactions to error recovery strategies from the victim’s perspective with the goal of understanding the elements of explanations that are most effective for encouraging forgiveness (i.e., Fehr et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2004; Obuchi et al., 1989). When applied to leadership settings, these studies provide some guidance for how subordinates may respond to leader apologies but give little insight for the effect of the apology on the leader’s reaction to their own recovery from a mistake. Although subordinate perceptions are important for understanding leadership processes, subordinates often do not have complete insight into leader behaviors because they do not witness relevant leader activities such as strategic planning and environmental scanning (Hunter et al., 2007). Furthermore, leaders have greater influence over organizations than lower-level employees, and leader recovery process can have a lasting impact on those around them. The focus on the leader’s perspective of an error recovery event will contribute to our understanding of how failure and recovery influence leaders.
A focus on gender and behavior. Few studies have examined individual differences in both the type of recovery method that leaders choose as well as how they perceive their errors. Some researchers have suggested that gender may also be a factor in error recovery, proposing that women would be more likely to apologize than men (Lazare, 2004; Tannen, 1999). However, there is little empirical evidence that examines gender in leader error recovery. This will be the first study to measure gender as a predictor of leader error recovery strategy by testing how individuals in a leadership position respond to the same mistake.

Examining effective leader recovery. Third, this effort will focus specifically on methods for recovering from mistakes rather than focusing only on the failure events themselves. Although the leader derailment and error literature have provided some insight into understanding negative leader behaviors, they provide an incomplete account of the leaders’ role in their own recovery. The events that occur after an error may be just as important for the leader’s long-term functioning as the mistake itself. There are only a few studies that directly examine leaders’ reflections about their previous mistakes (Kusy & Essex, 2005; Stoner & Gilligan, 2002). These studies focus on the types of errors that leaders make and give general advice for continuing after a mistake occurs, but they do not elaborate on how different recovery methods affect the leader’s subsequent behaviors. This study aims to clarify the process of error recovery for leaders.

A combination of methods. Fourth, both an experimental and survey methodology is utilized for the study of leader error recovery. Previous research on apologies has often relied on vignette studies (Meier, 1998). A significant drawback of vignette studies is that asking participants to imagine their reactions to a particular situation can result in social desirability biases and demand characteristics due to framing (Wason, Polonsky, & Hyman, 2003). Because apologies are generally perceived as a socially desirable response to conflict, participants may be more likely to over report their use and value.
Consequently, vignette studies of apology may be more useful for reporting attitudes about apologizing rather than predicting behaviors after a real conflict.

The present study chose the experimental and survey methodology for several reasons. While acknowledging limitations of the ecological validity of laboratory studies for leadership research, experimental research can make a strong theoretical contribution by testing, extending, and building theory (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007). The experimental method also has the advantage of comparing leaders’ responses to the same mistake, allowing the researcher to make more specific comparisons between outcomes. The survey supplements these findings with data from leaders in more natural settings. The laboratory methodology creates greater control for understanding the process of leader error recovery, while the field study extends the generalizability of these findings. I begin with Study 1, a lab study of leader reactions to mistakes.

**Study 1 Method**

The questionnaire for Study 1 was administrated online. Leaders were asked to describe two task mistakes in detail, one mistake that they made in private and another that they made in public. For each mistake, participants were also asked how they reacted to the mistake, the recovery strategy that they used, and the level of interaction they had with their followers afterwards. All qualitative responses were coded by a team of three coders who received extensive rater training.

**Participants**

Participants from a variety of management experience levels were targeted. Although participants had to have had two years of experience in a leadership position to participate, recruiting participants with relatively low levels of management experience means that mistakes are both more frequent and more memorable for them. Previous authors have suggested that novice leaders may be more likely to commit more errors than experienced leaders (Hunter, Tate, Dziewczynski, & Bedell-Avers, 2011). For example, a sample of 84 U.S. Army captains found that experience was a significant
predictor of leadership performance (Bettin & Kennedy, 1990) and a qualitative study of university presidents proposed that the worst errors were committed at the beginning of the first presidency terms (Neumann, 1990). In addition to committing mistakes more often, novice leaders may be better at recalling mistakes. Self-concepts about ability and competence are more fragile early in professional development, so mistakes can be particularly devastating for novices (Crigger, 2004). However, a field sample was used in order to increase the generalizability of results to all leaders, so leaders with greater leadership experience were also targeted. Although mistakes may be more likely and more memorable for novice leaders, they can happen for leaders at any point in their career.

A total of 278 participants were sampled from three different sources. There were 35 students from a military training academy, a student sample of novice leaders that included 117 participants with at least two years of work experience, and another sample of 126 obtained from Amazon Turk that was used to recruit a non-student sample. In the total sample, 49.6% were men and 50.4% were women, the average age was 30 (SD = 13.41), 76% were Caucasian, and they had an average of 5 years of leadership experience.

Survey Instructions

Two problems with asking leaders to recall past failures are that participants 1) may not feel comfortable sharing failures and 2) may not recall failures because of their low base rate. To ameliorate these problems, the survey was purposely administered online to allow for the greatest anonymity. As discussed previously, leader errors may be particularly impactful and thus more sensitive to describe. By filling out a confidential survey, leaders would have the greatest chance of preventing embarrassment and discussing the mistake honestly. In order to address the error recall issue, participants were asked to generate a list of three mistakes that they made in their current leadership position to begin the recall process. Several broad examples of leader task errors adapted from Yukl’s (2006) taxonomy of leader task behaviors were provided, and participants were told that they would be asked about a
mistake they made in public and another they made in private. This method was intended to prolong participant time and effort in choosing the mistakes they discussed in the questionnaire. The public mistake was described as a mistake that followers knew about without the leader telling them about it. In contrast, a private mistake was described as a mistake where the leader was the first and likely only person that knew the mistake occurred.

Measures

**Demographics.** Demographic variables included age, gender, ethnicity. Participants were also asked to report college GPA and SAT math and verbal scores as proxies for intelligence measures. Self-report measures of these scores usually correlate .70 to .90 with actual scores and there is a precedent for using these indicators as a proxy for cognitive ability (Kuncel et al., 2005; Valacich et al, 2006).

**Recovery strategy.** After describing each of their mistakes, leaders were asked a survey item about the recovery method they used. The responses in this multiple choice item were based on the taxonomy by Tata (2000) and Schonbach (1990) that ranged from most responsibility (apology) to least responsibility (ignored). Matching the recovery options from the lab study, the response options for this item included, “apologized for the mistake,” “justified (took responsibility but explained why the actions were correct under the circumstances)”, “made excuses or blamed external circumstances”, and “ignored the mistake (did not discuss it with followers)”.

**Avoidance of followers.** Participants rated how likely they are to avoid their followers after they described each mistake. Items were adapted from the avoidance subscale of Rahim and Magner’s (1995) Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory II (ROCI-II). Previously the items were written from a follower’s perspective regarding their supervisor, but the roles described in the items were reversed for this study. Participants were asked to what extent they avoided followers after the mistake. Items included, “avoid open discussion of your differences with your followers” “tried to avoid unpleasant exchanges with your followers,” and “avoid an encounter with your followers”. Alpha coefficients for the subscales of the
ROCI-II reportedly ranged from .72 to .76 for managerial samples and .65 to .80 for collegiate samples (Rahim & Magner, 1995). In this study, alpha coefficients were acceptable (.89).

**Study 1 Results**

The Study 1 descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities can be found in Table 1. Recall that hypothesis 1 predicted that leaders would be more likely to use apologies in public mistakes than in private mistakes. A chi-square test indicated that there was a significant difference between recovery tactics reported for private mistakes and for public mistakes, with a significant kappa of .09 ($p < .05$). Apologies were more frequently cited as the recovery tactic in public mistakes (195 out of 278) than in private mistakes (130 out of 278), while ignoring was more often used in private mistakes (85 out of 278) than in public mistakes (14 out of 278). See figure 1 for a comparison. These results suggest support for hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that leader recovery strategy would predict avoidance of followers. An ANOVA with post-hoc tests revealed significant differences between recovery strategies and mean scores of follower avoidance ($F(3, 552) = 15.09, p < .05$). When leaders apologized, they were the least likely to avoid their followers. Specifically, post-hoc tests suggested that apology was significantly different from the other three tactics and results in the lowest levels of avoidance of followers. See Figure 2 and Table 2 for a comparison of recovery strategies. Thus, it seems that acknowledging a mistake is related to whether or not a leader avoids followers.

Hypothesis 3a stated that men and women would be equally likely to use each recovery strategy. In the public error context, a chi-square test resulted in a non-significant kappa of .00 ($p = .94$) when examining differences between men and women’s choices in recovery strategies. There were similar results in the private error context, with a non-significant kappa of .00 ($p = .96$). Thus, there were no differences in reporting recovery tactics for men and women and hypothesis 3a was supported.
Recall that Hypothesis 3b stated that gender would moderate the relationship between error context and avoidance of followers such that men would be more likely to avoid followers in the public condition. This hypothesis was tested using a repeated measures ANOVA ($F(1, 276) = 5.36, p \leq .05$). Surprisingly, men were more likely to avoid followers in the private context ($M=1.99, SD=.11$) than the public context ($M=1.44, SD=.07$). In contrast, women were consistent across both contexts (see Figure 3). These findings provided partial support for hypothesis 3b, albeit in the private context rather than the public context that I predicted.

**Study 1 Limitations and Rationale for Study 2**

Although Study 1 provided some useful contributions to our understanding of how leaders respond to mistakes, survey methodology in the study of apologies has some limitations. As noted earlier, the majority of studies in the apology literature have consisted of asking people how they would react in a hypothetical situation. As suggested by Baumiester, Vohs, & Funder (2007), asking people what they would do in a situation and observing what they were do often lead to very different conclusions. Studies of affective forecasting suggest that people tend to be inaccurate in their predictions of how they would feel or behave in hypothetical situations (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). Thus, while the aim of Study 1 was to ask leaders to describe their perceptions of their own behaviors, Study 2 objectively measured leader behaviors after a mistake. The methods for Study 2 are described below.

**Study 2 Method**

The study was a between-subjects design with two experimental conditions and a control condition where no error was made, resulting in three total study conditions. In each condition, participants were assigned a leadership position and asked to lead confederate followers through two tasks, giving feedback to the followers after each task. In the mistake conditions, participants were led
to believe that they made a mistake after the second task, either in front of their followers or alone with the administrator. Willingness to interact with followers was measured by the participant’s behavior in the elevator after the experiment and their response to an email request by the confederate follower.

Participants

Participants with at least two years of work experience were recruited from the psychology department subject pool of a large northeastern university and were randomly assigned to conditions. The sample consisted of 92 participants, including 27 in the control condition, 31 in the private condition, and 34 in the public condition. The sample was 40% were male and 60% were female. The average age was 21 (SD = 3.79) and 78% were Caucasian. Participants were given extra credit as compensation.

Procedure

At the beginning of the experiment, the participant was asked to complete a fake “leadership personality inventory” to determine that the participant has the highest leadership ability in the group, which consists of three confederates. The participant was then told that as the leader, he or she would be asked to give feedback to followers (the confederate group members) at the end of the study and discuss his or her experiences via survey. The participant was then given instructions for leading the subordinates through two tasks. An outline of the sequence of events for this experiment is presented in Appendix B.

Previous studies have successfully created leadership situations in the laboratory (Hunt, Boal, & Dodge, 1999; De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2004), and a recent study has asked participants to act as leaders with confederate followers (Gino, Grant, & Hoffman, 2011). To enhance the experimental realism, participant leaders were told that they were 1) receiving “higher pay” than the confederate followers (more research credit), 2) were making more complex decisions while the followers perform simpler tasks, 3) were in charge of the timely completion for the experiment, and 4) were asked to
evaluate follower performance and give feedback (Johnson, 1994). All of these instructions were intended to create the perception that the leader’s role is a higher status role and the leader has greater responsibility than the followers.

After these initial instructions were given to the participant, he or she led the confederate followers through two tasks. The study administrator explained the instructions to the leader separately and gave the leader time to review the instructions before presenting them to their team. The administrator emphasized that it is the leader’s job to record the team’s responses and the leader is responsible for the final product that represents the team.

In the first task, the team was asked to create five entrées sold by the University Café, a new local restaurant. In the second task, the team had to decide on five promotions to attract customers to the University Café. For each task, confederates practiced responses to “spontaneously” present to the team throughout the task. After each task, participant leaders were asked to give three statements of general feedback to their group about their performance on the task. This feedback task was intended to further emphasize the leader’s responsibility to the group and provide a relationship-oriented aspect of their leadership role. In addition, the feedback giving time for the second task would occur right after the mistake, giving the leader an opportunity to address the mistake if he or she chose to.

The leader’s forced mistake occurred at the end of Task 2. Using an online website similar to Dropbox, the administrator arranged for one of the leader’s files to “disappear” after the leader saved their team’s responses. In the private mistake conditions, the experimenter alerted the leader that their file was saved incorrectly when the leader was alone in his or her office. In the public mistake conditions, the experimenter announced to the entire group that the leader did not save the file correctly.

The feedback session following the second task gave the leader a chance to publically address the group and provide an opportunity to apologize if the leader wished to do so. Confederates were
instructed to show dismay at being told that they would no longer be considered for the prize money but to act impassively as much as possible. Furthermore, if the leader chose to discuss the mistake with their followers, the study administrator was told to explain that the team members would still receive credit for participation. The participant’s explanation was unobtrusively video-taped and coded to determine which error recovery strategy was used. At the conclusion of the lab experiment, the participant completed a survey about his or her experiences.

A week after the experiment, participants were sent an email from one of their same-gender followers, who was ostensibly in their very large Introduction to Psychology class. Their email was supposedly obtained from a group email sent by the experiment confirming that everyone got credit for participating (see Appendix C). The confederate’s email was sent one week after the experiment and asked whether the participant would be willing to help the follower with a class assignment where they had to interview someone with leadership experience. After the participant responded to this email or two days after the email was sent, the participant was debriefed.

Measures

Demographic and personality variables were gathered at the beginning of the study on a computer. These items were part of the false Leadership Assessment that assigns the participant to the leadership role. Coders received two days of training and were blind to the study hypotheses.

Demographic variables. Demographic variables include participant age, gender, and race.

Leader recovery choice for mistake. All interactions between leaders and followers were videotaped by a camera in the lab as well as the webcam on the participant’s laptop. A team of three qualitative coders had extensive training before coding. Coders categorized the type of response to the mistake that the leader made based on the level of accountability that the participant displayed. In instances where participants expressed more than one recovery tactic, such as using the words “I’m
“Sorry” as an introduction to an excuse, coders were instructed to code the strategy as an excuse because a mitigating tactic was included. Interrater reliability was acceptable ($ICC_{1,k} = .90$).

**Qualitative Coding of Leader Remorse.** At the end of the experiment, the participant was asked a series of open-ended questions about their experiences. The survey asked the participant to describe one thing they did well in the experiment, one thing they did poorly in the experiment, and if they would have done anything differently. Remorse was coded as the expression of distress or regret caused by a sense of guilt on a scale of 1-5, where 5 indicated high remorse. These qualitative items were rated by a team of three independent coders to assess the level of remorse that the participant expressed. Interrater reliability was acceptable for the qualitative ratings of leader remorse ($ICC_{1,k} = .85$).

**Qualitative Coding of Leader Responsibility.** In addition to the remorse variable above, the three independent coders assessed the level of responsibility that the leader took for the mistake in their description of what they did well, what they did poorly, and what they would have done differently. Responsibility was coded as the expression of accountability for the mistake that occurred on a scale of 1-5, where 5 was high responsibility. Interrater reliability was acceptable for the qualitative ratings of leader responsibility ($ICC_{1,k} = .67$).

**Leader Post-Experiment Apology in the Elevator.** After the experiment concluded, the three confederate followers entered an elevator with the participant to leave the building. Confederates were asked to provide accounts of how the leader acted in the elevator and rate the extent to which the leader apologized, independent of their behavior during the experiment. Interrater reliability was acceptable for ratings of the leader’s apology in the elevator ($ICC_{1,k} = .95$).

**Qualitative Coding of Leader Avoidance of Followers.** A week after the experiment, participants were emailed a request for help from one of the confederates in their study (see Appendix C). Participant email responses were coded for the degree to which the participant was not willing to
interact with the follower again, ranging from not very willing to no response to the email. Interrater reliability was acceptable for ratings of the leader’s avoidance of followers (ICC 1,k = .99).

**Manipulation Check.** In addition to this qualitative coding, participants were asked about the mistake at the end of their final questionnaire. The participant was first asked to describe anything that went wrong with the study in an open-ended question. On the next page of the questionnaire, the participant was then also asked, “if anything went wrong today, how did you respond?”. This multiple choice question included the answers “apologized for the error,” “justified the actions that I took and explained why they were correct under the circumstances,” “ignored or made no response,” and “there was no mistake today.”

**Study 2 Results**

**Manipulation Checks.** Because the lab study continued after the participants left the study, an explicit manipulation check could undermine the post-experiment portion of the study. Instead, participants were asked to describe “something that they did well” and “something that went poorly” in the experiment. Coders looked for the participant mentioning not saving the document correctly as a manipulation check for the study. Cohen’s Kappa was used to assess whether participant responses matched with their experimental group (Landis & Koch, 1977). A significant kappa coefficient of 0.33 (p = .05) was observed, with participants correctly reporting the file error in the experimental conditions approximately 82% of the time. However, asking people to report on personal failure is unlikely to get a highly accurate response, since people are often inaccurate in recalling their failures (Tykocinski, 2001).

A second check at the end of the questionnaire asked leaders, “if anything went wrong today, how did you respond?” and included options for apologizing, justifying, making an excuse, ignoring the mistake, and a no mistake option. This question was compared to the results of three video coders’ categorizations of error recovery strategy from videotapes of the participant’s feedback to followers. The significant kappa coefficient of .14 (p = .05) suggests that overall, there was agreement between
coders and the participants’ recollection of their recovery strategy. For participants who apologized or made excuses, there was almost complete agreement, with only one person from each category choosing a different option than what was coded. However, in the ignore condition, 15 out of 32 participants that were coded as using the ignore strategy self-identified themselves as apologizing for the mistake. Since coders were using objective videos of the participant’s response to their mistake and inter-rater reliability was fairly high (.90), I feel confident in the coder identification of the recovery strategy. This finding suggests an interesting discrepancy between how people think they respond to a mistake and how people actually respond to a mistake, particularly when they chose ignoring as their recovery strategy.

**Test of Hypotheses.** Correlations and descriptive statistics are shown in Table 3. The first hypothesis, which suggested that leaders would be more willing to apologize for a mistake in public rather than in private conditions, was tested using a chi-square test. The test showed a significant difference between recovery tactics used in the public and private condition, with a kappa of .13 ($p < .05$). As illustrated in Figure 4, ignoring was the recovery strategy used most often in the private condition (18 out of 31 participants) and apology was the most frequently used strategy in the public condition (16 out of 34 participants). These results support hypothesis 1.

In order to test the second hypothesis, which stated that recovery tactic would predict the leader’s avoidance of followers, I conducted an ANOVA. In this study, avoidance was operationalized as a qualitative coding of the extent to which the participant agreed to an email request from a confederate follower and the time it took them to respond to the email. Across all three conditions, approximately half of the participants responded to the email, and of those, approximately 65% were rated as “not at all avoidant” by the coders. As shown in Table 4, I observed a significant difference of leader avoidance ($F(2, 91) = 3.11, p < .05$) depending on the recovery strategy that the participant used. Participants who chose an excuse as their recovery strategy were least likely to avoid ($M=2.0, SD=.55$),
followed by apology ($M=3.0$, $SD=.39$) and ignoring ($M=3.75$, $SD=.32$). For participants in the control condition, the willingness to interact was rated in the middle ($M=3.09$, $SD=.35$), closest to those who used the apology strategy (see Figure 5). Furthermore, recovery strategy predicted the length of time that it took participants to respond to the email ($F(2, 91) = 3.99$, $p < .05$). As shown in Figure 6, these means corresponded with the participant’s avoidance of followers, following a fairly similar pattern where those who made excuses responded most quickly ($M=454.6$ hours, $SD=342.92$), followed by control ($M=1161.15$, $SD=231.17$), apology ($M=1316.32$, $SD=242.49$), and ignoring ($M=1576.74$, $SD=231.17$). However, post-hoc tests for recovery tactics and avoidance of followers concluded that the only significant differences were between the ignore and excuse strategies. For email response time, post-hoc tests showed significant differences between excuses and apology/ignore ($p < .05$). In contrast to Study 1, where leaders who used excuses reported that they were most likely to avoid their followers, leaders who used excuses in Study 2 avoided their followers least.

In addition to leader behaviors towards followers, a series of exploratory analyses were conducted to gain insight into leaders’ perceptions of the mistake. First, I examined whether recovery strategy predicted qualitative ratings of the leader’s feelings of responsibility and remorse for the mistake in the survey. Leaders were asked a series of open-ended questions immediately after they gave feedback to followers (and had the opportunity to use a recovery strategy), and I was interested in whether leaders who apologized were more likely to feel responsibility and remorse. As shown in Table 4, I observed a significant difference for leader remorse ($F(1, 64) = 4.89$, $p < .05$) and responsibility ($F(1, 64) = 8.91$, $p < .05$). This finding provides some evidence that apologies are linked with leader feelings of remorse and responsibility rather than simply an attempt to appear contrite to followers (see Figure 7).

In a second exploratory analysis, I examined whether leaders were consistent with the recovery tactics they used. Specifically, I compared the leader’s recovery tactic used during follower feedback with what the leader said to followers in the elevator after the study. The initial recovery tactic
predicted whether a leader was likely to apologize for the mistake in the elevator \((F(1, 64) = 7.49, p < .05)\), with post-hoc tests indicating that apologies were significantly different than ignoring \((p < .05)\) and excuses \((p < .05)\) (see Figure 8). Approximately 45% of participants who used excuses as their recovery tactic during feedback offered an apology to followers in the elevator, compared to 9% of those who ignored the mistake during feedback. Interestingly, approximately 45% of those who apologized in feedback gave a second apology in the elevator. In other words, people who gave excuses were most likely to switch tactics - half of those who gave excuses switched to an apology while half of those who apologized gave a second apology and those who ignored continued to ignore the mistake in the elevator. Even when I recoded the participants who changed tactics in the elevator (i.e. those who used excuses in the feedback but apologized in the elevator were recoded as apologizers), those who gave excuses were still the least likely to avoid followers and the overall trends in the were the same.

Continuing the exploratory analysis, I was interested in whether the study condition would have an indirect effect on participants’ likelihood of apologizing in the elevator. I tested this assumption using bootstrapped confidence intervals in Hayes’ PROCESS macro, and the recovery tactic was found to have an indirect effect on the condition and apology in the elevator \((b = .33, \text{bootstrapped } SE = .20, 95\% \text{ CI = .03 through .83, } p < .05)\). Overall, these exploratory findings suggested that leaders who ignored their mistakes tended to be consistent and were less likely to approach followers in the elevator by discussing the mistake and taking responsibility for it. Although admittedly exploratory, these findings lend some degree of additional support and clarity to hypothesis 2.

The third hypothesis suggested that a) men and women would not differ in how they respond to mistakes but b) would differ in how they behaved after the mistake. As predicted and consistent with the findings from the field study, a chi-square test found no relationship between gender and recovery tactic as evidenced by a non-significant kappa of .07 \((p = .21)\). However, mistakes did influence the extent to which men were willing to interact with followers. An ANOVA showed an interaction effect
between gender and willingness to comply with the follower’s request for interaction via email ($F(1, 91) = 3.17, p < .05$). While women acted consistently towards followers in all three conditions, men were least likely to avoid followers in the control condition ($M=3.38, SD=.62$) than when they made a mistake in private ($M=3.50, SD=.48$) or public ($M=4.08, SD=.54$). See Table 5 and Figure 9 for details. Overall, I found support for Hypothesis 3a and partial support for Hypothesis 3b.

**General Discussion**

The aggregate of Study 1 and Study 2 reveal three general and relatively consistent findings. First, leaders are more likely to apologize for public mistakes than for private mistakes. Second, the recovery method that a leader chooses is predictive of their likelihood of avoiding followers. Third, although men and women are equally likely to use the same recovery strategies when addressing mistakes, men are sometimes more likely to avoid followers in the time that follows. I discuss implications for each of these findings, as well as their significance to the Ren and Gray’s (2009) theoretical framework for relationship repair, in greater detail below.

**Context for the mistake matters.** Several researchers have suggested that context is an important component of understanding the recovery methods that people choose (Kim et al., 2006; Ren & Gray, 2009; Folger & Skarlicki, 1999). This study examined whether the amount of information that followers had about a mistake would predict the leader’s recovery method. In terms of Ren and Gray’s theoretical model, it was hypothesized that a victim (follower) would be unlikely to “challenge” the transgressor (the leader) for a mistake in the private context because of the differing status levels between them. Thus, leaders had less of an incentive to discuss private mistakes with followers. This hypothesis was supported – leaders were much more likely to apologize for public mistakes than for private mistakes.

This context finding gives evidence for the importance of context in assessing people’s choices in recovery strategies. In particular, the Study 1 within-person differences in recovery strategies suggest
that leaders vary in their recovery choices depending on the situation. Although some researchers have found individual differences in the likelihood to apologize (i.e., Howell, Dopko, Turowksi, & Buro’s (2011) development of the Proclivity to Apologize Measure), these studies have used hypothetical scenarios, and there is evidence to suggest that behavioral forecasting of the value for apologies and true value for apologies does not always match (De Cremer et al., 2011). In this study, there is consistent evidence that context is important for leaders’ choices in recovery strategies and leaders are more likely to apologize for public mistakes.

**Ignoring mistakes predicts avoidance of followers.** The recovery strategy that a leader chooses seems to be predictive of their future behaviors, specifically their willingness to interact with followers rather than avoid them after a mistake. Ren and Gray (2009) suggest that this willingness to interact is a signal of relationship repair after conflict and is important for reestablishing the social structure of a work relationship. If addressing a mistake leads to greater willingness to interact with followers, perhaps more leaders should express responsibility for mistakes with followers if restoring their relationship with followers is their primary goal. In the field, I found that leaders who apologized tended to avoid their followers the least, but in the lab we found that giving an excuse or apologizing was more predictive of interacting with followers.

There are several reasons why leader recovery methods may influence leader behaviors towards followers. Leaders who ignore followers immediately after a transgression may infer from their own behavior that the relationship is not worth the effort of restoring. According to self-perception theory, people discover their attitudes by inferring them from observations of their own behaviors, particularly when other cues are ambiguous or weak (Bem, 1972). A transgression provides an especially information-rich scenario for leaders to discover their attitudes towards followers. For example, leaders may infer the closeness of their ties to followers based on how truthful the leader is about his or her transgression. Furthermore, cognitive dissonance theory would predict that a leader’s behavior towards
subordinates should align with his or her beliefs about people and events (Festinger, 1957). Previous research suggests that people are less likely to lie to those that they are closer to and people felt worse when they lied to people who they were close to (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). If leaders do not address their mistakes to subordinates, they are implicitly suggesting that subordinates are not worthy of the respect that accompanies apology. This discounting of followers may result in a more global negative bias against followers, which can affect future behavior towards followers. Thus, leaders may use their initial recovery strategy as a guide for how to behave toward their followers after a mistake occurs.

This finding suggests that acknowledging a mistake to followers may be particularly important for leaders’ relationship repair. People tend to distance themselves from negative events and those associated with them, and acknowledging a mistake may be a method of overcoming that negative association. Research on downsizing, for example, suggests that “tough times can make tough bosses”, where leaders react to a negative event by shutting down (Folger & Skarlicki, 1998). However, managers who exhibit more distance during tough times can cause problems both for the victims of the downsizing and organizational stakeholders (Casio, 1993). Other research suggests that managers can minimize these effects by increasing interpersonal sensitivity (Brockner, 1992). Thus, acknowledging a mistake can be an important first step for repairing relationship conflict.

When leaders feel better about themselves because they believe that they have acted in the most appropriate way, they can refocus on their relationships with others. For leaders, taking full responsibility for a failure may be an important part of assessing their own behavior and making positive goals for change. Studies of organizations’ accounts of negative events to stockholders suggest that organizations that indicated responsibility for the negative events had better future outcomes (Lee, Peterson, & Tiedens, 2004). When leaders publically admit to making a mistake, they are suggesting that their behavior was wrong and they do not want to repeat it in the future.
Gender is predictive of what leaders do but not what leaders say after a mistake. Consistent with the suggestions of Schuman and Ross (2010), the results of this study suggest that men and women do not differ in the recovery tactics they use. However, men and women do differ in their behavior towards followers after a mistake. Men were more likely to avoid followers after a mistake occurred, and women acted consistently towards followers in both mistake and control conditions. Consequently, male leaders may inadvertently exacerbate the negative effects of mistakes by the way they act afterwards. This finding is particularly relevant given that the majority of leadership positions are held by men (Schien, 2007). Thus, researchers studying relationship repair should not ignore gender.

There are several reasons why men may be more likely to avoid followers. Van Velsor and Hughes (1990) suggest that there are different opportunities for women and men in the workplace and these opportunities shape the way in which men and women learn to deal with obstacles at work. Perhaps men have had a greater number of negative previous experiences with followers that lead them to avoid followers more in difficult situations. Alternatively, it is possible that women simply place a greater value on relationships and do not avoid followers as much because of this. Women have a greater need to influence without authority (Ohlott et al., 1994), and maintaining their relationships with followers is an important way of doing that. Women use social support to deal with conflict, while men may be more likely to feel the need to deal with challenges on their own (Melamed, Kushnir, & Meir, 1991). Other studies have shown that women are more likely to reflect on and learn from negative feedback, taking more of an approach response to negative situations than men (Alsé, Leevens, & Schoellart, 2009). While these studies may help explain why men are more likely to avoid followers after a mistake, it is unclear whether this behavior is temporary or whether there are lasting effects of these avoidance behaviors. These findings suggest a need for theory to address individual differences in relationship repair.
**Theoretical implications**

This study attempted to test and extend Ren and Gray’s (2009) theoretical framework for relationship repair. Our results support their assertion that context is an important aspect of choosing a recovery strategy and that different strategies can result in varying levels of willingness to interact with the people associated with the transgression. I suggest an extension to their framework to include not only cultural norms (individualistic vs. collectivistic) but also norms for men and women involved in relationship conflict.

This study is among the first studies to test recovery tactics using the same mistake. The previous inconsistencies in the findings for the benefits of apology may stem from differences in research methods. McCollough and Hoyt (2002) have argued that historical accounts of transgression are more accurate than vignette studies because people assigned greater weight to cues within the vignettes than they would in real life. Similarly, De Cremer and colleagues (2011) have shown that people are not accurate in the extent to which they believe an apology would be important to them vs. an apology’s true value in historical accounts. The manipulation checks in Study 2 further illustrated that even moments after the recovery event, people do not accurately recall their own behaviors and mistakenly believe that they have apologized when they did not. All together, these findings suggest that people recollection of recovery events are tentative at best, and provide a strong case for measuring behavior in controlled settings rather than relying on people’s descriptions of their behaviors.

**Practical implications**

Although previous research is inconclusive about the general effectiveness of leader apology for restoring followers’ perceptions of leader competence, there is reason to believe that apology may be beneficial for the leader even without follower forgiveness. Leaders who apologize seem to avoid followers less, a behavior that is indicative of relationship repair. More generally, mistakes are in
essence the violations of norms, and as such, the repair of mistakes is an opportunity to re-establish norms (Ren & Gray, 2009). Although our research focused mainly on lower-level leaders, we can speculate that leaders in the upper echelon may behave similarly, but may have more complex situations because of stakeholders such as board members or the general public.

There were also some practical implications regarding the moderation of gender and avoidance of followers. Men seem to have more of a reaction to mistakes than women do, and this negative reaction spills over to followers. If a male leader is preoccupied with his own mistake, he is less available for their followers. Therefore, male leaders should be particularly careful not to alienate their followers after a mistake, potentially making the outcomes of a mistake more severe.

Limitations

Overall, the predictors and outcomes of leader apologies are somewhat unclear because of the complexity of the relationships between leaders and followers. This study acknowledges the limitations of attempting to infer leader decision-making processes and constructing leader-follower relationships in the lab. As previously discussed, there were several limitations with the Study 1. According to Tykocinski (2001), people who reflect on negative events tend to see their outcomes as inevitable and may be less likely to consider the possible positive outcomes of alternative strategies. Survey studies that ask leaders to reflect on their previous mistakes introduce a host of extraneous contextual variables such as error severity, strength of previous relationship, outcomes, and follower individual differences.

Study 2 also had some notable limitations. First, the somewhat small sample size and the use of a student sample present some limitations in the generalizability of the findings. Second, the leader-follower relationship in this study was fairly short since the study only lasted for approximately two hours. Although I asked participants to lead followers through two tasks and used a request a week later to improve this limitation in the study, this relationship is still different than those in the work
environment. Finally, one of the greatest benefits of an experiment in the laboratory is its degree of control, but this comes with a tradeoff of inclusiveness for the myriad of task mistakes that leaders can make. In this study, leaders each made the same mistake, which involved them incorrectly saving a file.

Furthermore, these studies were focused on just one type of mistake: a task mistake. Ren and Gray (2009) suggested the use of different recovery strategies for task and relationship mistakes. It is possible that men and women may differ for their reactions to relationship mistakes, which tend to be less clearly identified. This is especially true given that men are less likely to identify when conflict is occurring than women are (Schuman & Ross, 2010). The field sample did not have a control condition, so it was difficult to compare how much leaders typically avoid their followers.

Despite these limitations, this study is among the first to test leader error recovery in the laboratory. This methodology allows for more analogous comparisons between individual recovery methods by standardizing the mistake that is examined. In addition, the introduction of a variety of new predictor and outcome variables provides a contribution to the conflicting literature on leader apologies.

**Future Research**

This study examined how leaders behave towards followers in public and private mistakes. Although this study has provided some evidence for the benefits of acknowledging mistakes, more studies are needed in order to understand why leaders choose the recovery tactics they use and the effects of these choices. When a transgressor repents, it can have implications for how the offended party feels about himself or herself and also how the offended party feels about the transgressor (Struthers, Dupuis, & Eaton, 2005). Consequently, a focus on the cognitive and emotional processes of these events for both leaders and followers would be beneficial for understanding the effects of relationship conflict.
In addition to understanding the cognitive processes involved in choosing a mistake, more research is needed on long-term outcomes of the relationship repair. For example, it is possible that leader’s positions of influence mean that followers may particularly negative consequences if relationships are not repaired after a mistake. Future research should address whether recovery strategies would affect leaders’ ratings of follower performance or other work-related outcomes. Furthermore, there is evidence that suggest that leader-follower relationships are very influential to employee commitment (Graen & Uhl Bein, 1995), and future research can examine whether leader recovery strategies can predict turnover for both leaders and followers.

Finally, future research should examine whether the type of mistake made has implications for the recovery method a leader uses. This study focused on task mistakes, but there is reason to believe that apologies may be more important for relationship mistakes. As suggested by Ren and Gray (2009), relationship errors can challenge the victim’s personal identity, and it may therefore be more important for a transgressor to cater to the victim’s relational needs after a relationship mistake.

Conclusion

Previous studies have focused on victim’s perceptions of recovery strategies, but transgressors have a variety of motives for choosing the level of responsibility to take for a mistake. Using Ren and Gray’s (2009) theoretical framework as a guide, our results suggest that leaders may be more likely to admit to a mistake when followers have more information about it. In addition, the recovery choice that leaders make can influence their behavior towards followers, and men may be especially likely to distance themselves after a mistake. Thus, from the leader’s perspective, private mistakes may be particularly difficult to recover from because there are fewer external cues to apologize, which is an important step to repairing relationships with followers.
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doi:10.1016/1048-9843(95)90036-5


doi:10.1075/japc.20.1.06han


doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2010.03.005


Appendix A: Avoidance Scale

Avoidance Subscale from the ROCI-II (Rahim & Magner, 1995)

1. I will attempt to avoid being “put on the spot” and try to keep my conflict with my follower to myself
2. I will avoid open discussion of my differences with my followers
3. I will try to stay away from disagreement with my followers
4. I will avoid an encounter with my followers
5. I will try to keep my disagreement with my followers to myself in order to avoid hard feelings
6. I will try to avoid unpleasant exchanges with my followers
Appendix B: Sequence of Events in Study 2

1. First questionnaire
2. Questionnaire determines that participant is chosen as leader
3. Administrator gives leader instructions for the rest of the study
4. Leader given 5 minutes to read over Task 1 directions
5. Task 1
6. Leader prepares to address the group with 3 statements of feedback about task
7. First feedback session
8. Leader given 5 minutes to read over Task 2 directions
9. Task 2
10. *Leader is alerted that mistake has occurred, either in front of followers or in private
11. Leader prepares to address the group with 3 statements of feedback about task
12. Second feedback session
13. Second questionnaire
14. Leader and followers leave experiment via elevator
15. One week later, participant receives an email from same-gendered participant requesting help
Appendix C: Email sent to lab participants

Initial email to participant and all three confederate in each study, sent immediately after the experiment:

Hello everyone,

Thanks again for participating in the study today. I have given you all credit on the SONA website, so you should see it registered within a few days.

Best,

Ryan

Email to participant from same-gender confederate, sent one week after the previous email from the experimenter:

Hey (participant’s first name),

Not sure if you remember me from that study we did last week, but I don’t know a lot of people here yet.

I need some help with an assignment from another class. I’m supposed to interview someone that had a leadership experience and write a paper about it. The interview is about 10 questions, and I think it will take about a half hour to do it. Do you think you’d have some time either this week or next week to help me out?

Thanks!

Andrea/Tyler
### Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Reliabilities for Study 1

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Note: Condition was coded 0=control, 1=private, 2=public; Recovery was coded 1=apology, 2=excuse, 3=ignore. Gender was coded 1=male, 2=female.

All correlations above an absolute value of 0.09 significant at p < 0.05. Reliabilities are presented along the diagonal in parentheses.
**Table 2**

Study I: Summary of Univariate ANOVA for Leader Avoidance of Followers by Recovery Strategy

<table>
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<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1, 555</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Effects</td>
<td>15.09</td>
<td>3, 555</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader Recovery Strategy</td>
<td>15.09</td>
<td>3, 555</td>
<td>.00</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: F = F-ratio, df = degrees of freedom, p = significance level, η² = partial eta squared effect size.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>4.91</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email Response Time (hours)</td>
<td>12.58</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>11.89</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>9.15</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qual. Coding of Remorse</td>
<td>8.34</td>
<td></td>
<td>10.38</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>8.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apologized in Elevator</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreed to Email Help Request</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qual. Coding of Responsibility</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>(6.7)</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>6.90</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>9.49</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>11.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All correlation above an absolute value of .26 significant at p ≤ .05.

N = 92. Reliabilities are presented along the diagonal in parentheses.
Table 4 Summary of Univariate ANOVA for Leader Outcomes Comparing Recovery Strategies in Public vs. Private Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Main Effects</th>
<th>Main Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>df</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader Recovery Strategy</td>
<td>3.11 2.91</td>
<td>1.22 2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>247.63 1.91</td>
<td>.00 1.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: F = F-ratio, df = degrees of freedom, p = significance level, η² = partial eta squared effect size
Leader Recovery Strategy

Main Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>7.49</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: F = F-ratio, df = degrees of freedom, p = significance level, η² = partial eta squared effect size
Table 5
Study 2 Summary of Univariate Analysis of Variance for Condition by Gender Effect on Leader Avoidance of Confederate Email Request

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>(\eta^2)</th>
<th>(R^2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>1, 91</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Effects</td>
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<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition</td>
<td>.406</td>
<td>2, 91</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.493</td>
<td>1, 91</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition*Gender</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>1, 91</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \(F\) = F-ratio, \(df\) = degrees of freedom, \(p\) = significance level, \(\eta^2\) = partial eta squared effect size
Figure 1
Study 1 plots for recovery strategies used by leaders by context.

Note: Error bars show confidence intervals in Chi-square test.
Figure 2
Study 1 plots for level of follower avoidance by condition.
Figure 3
Study 1 plots for recovery strategies used by men and women for private mistakes.

Note: Error bars omitted for clarity. The only points outside of confidence intervals are the private vs. public error context points for men.
Figure 4
Study 2 plots for recovery strategies used by leaders by condition.

Note: Error bars show standard error for Chi-square test. No participants chose justification as their recovery strategy, and the control condition is not shown because there was no error in the control condition.
Figure 5
Study 2 plots of ratings of leader’s avoidance of confederate email request by recovery strategy.

Note: No participants chose justification as their recovery strategy.
Figure 6
Study 2 plots of leader email response time to confederate email asking for help in hours.

Note: No participants chose justification as their recovery strategy
Figure 7
Study 2 plots of qualitative ratings of leader responsibility and remorse by recovery strategy.

Note: No participants chose justification as their recovery strategy, and the control condition is not shown because there was no error in the control condition.
Figure 8
Study 2 plots of leader behaviors towards followers in elevator after the mistake event, as rated by confederate followers.

Post-Mistake Leader Apology to Follower in Elevator

![Graph showing leader recovery strategies]

**Note:** No participants chose justification as their recovery strategy, and the control condition is not shown because there was no error in the control condition.
Study 2 plots of interaction of condition and gender on leader avoidance of follower’s email request.

Note: Error bars omitted for clarity. The only points outside of confidence intervals are men’s control vs. public condition points.
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EDUCATION

Pennsylvania State University, 2012
  Ph.D., Industrial-Organizational Psychology. Minor: Statistics & Methods
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